

HOMI BHABHA

AN INTRODUCTION AND CRITIQUE

VOLUME 1: PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE

Andrew McLaverty-Robinson

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Some of the materials contained in these volumes will be adapted for use in the author's column, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/category/columns/in-theory/> where related materials on poststructuralism and critical theory can already be found.

About the Author

Andrew McLaverty-Robinson, who has previously published under the name Andrew Robinson or Andy Robinson, is a recovering former academic, freelance scholar and political commentator based in the UK. He has previously co-authored *Power, Conflict and Resistance in the Contemporary World* with Athina Karatzogianni, and co-edited *Riots and Militant Occupations* with Alissa Starodub. He has published over 20 peer-reviewed articles and chapters on a wide range of topics including critical theory, discourse, and radical politics.

Note on Readability

One of the purposes of this book is to provide an accurate, not “dumbed down”, but accessible introduction to a theorist whose works are notoriously difficult. The author has run the text through a document readability tool prior to publication. The

book registers at 14.43 on the Gunning Fog Index, 13.47 on the Coleman Liau Index, 12.29 on Flesch Kincaid Grade Level, 11.67 on Automated Readability Index (ARI), 13.69 on SMOG, and 36.32 on Flesch Reading Ease. This indicates that an A-level student in the UK or an American in the top school grade or first year at university will be able to understand the text easily on a first reading. A representative sample from Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture* scores 21.57 on the Gunning Fog Index and 18.50 on the Grade Level. This should be taken as indicative only, as these tools do not capture qualitative aspects of reading ease or difficulty.

CHAPTER 1

How to Read Homi Bhabha, and How to Read “Homi Bhabha: An Introduction and Critique”

An Introduction to an Introduction

This book is an introduction, and also a critique. It is written for students new to Bhabha, scholars seeking an overview of his theories, scholars already familiar with Bhabha and interested in critiques, and political activists interested in the significance of his theories. In this book, I seek to explain Bhabha's theory to readers mystified by his difficult prose. I also aim to fill in some of the theoretical and historical references which Bhabha does not explain. On top of this, I seek to examine whether Bhabha's theory works, and whether it leads to an effective radical politics. In answering the latter question, I explore Bhabha's roots in the decolonisation movement, the Anglophone (English-speaking) reception of French poststructuralism, the political tendencies closest to Bhabha's work, and also the wider field of “identity politics” and postcolonial radicalism to which Bhabha is loosely attached. This book looks not only at Bhabha's views, but also at the ways these views relate to political practices familiar to anyone following contemporary events. In doing so, it challenges whether the effects of this style of theory can really be characterised as radical. It indicates postcolonial theory's limits as well as its strengths in confronting contemporary forms of domination.



I have arranged these chapters in such a way that they start from the more basic assumptions of Bhabha's theory (1-4), apply these through the middle levels of sociological interpretation (5-9), and then show the more particular implications of the theory in practice (10-16). This introduction will make more sense as a logical presentation if read in this sequence. Most of Chapter 1 looks at Bhabha's style and the ways it reflects his beliefs. Chapters 2-3 lay out Bhabha's social ontology (his view of how the social world works) and his theory of subjectivity (his view of what individual people are). Chapter 4 provides a critique of Bhabha's views on these issues. Chapter 5 explains Bhabha's views on hybridity and inbetweenness, and Chapter 6 critiques these views. Chapter 7 explores Bhabha's special definition of the term "cultural difference", and how it differs from "diversity". Chapter 8 looks at his understanding of colonialism. Chapter 9 critiques his theory of colonialism.

The book then takes a break from Bhabha's theory to bridge between the exegetical and political sections. It provides an overview of the political and economic context in which Bhabha wrote, with a focus on the transition from Fordism to neoliberalism. Chapters 11-15 explore aspects of Bhabha's politics, and the political influence and effects of his work. Chapter 11 situates Bhabha in relation to different types of political action, showing how he focuses on everyday and cultural politics. Chapter 12 situates his political views in relation to the New Times/*Marxism Today* tendency in the 1980s. Chapters 13-14 explore his relationship to a range of other political theories, including liberalism, communitarianism, Marxism, critical race theory, and anti-colonialism. Chapter 14 also explores Marxist and radical critiques of Bhabha. Chapter 15 looks at Bhabha's practical political proposals, including his ideas of communities of suffering, the "right to development" and the "right to narrate". Finally, Chapter 16 provides a critique and appreciation of the political effects of Bhabha's work, from my own perspective. It examines the overlaps between Bhabha's theory and contemporary identity politics. It also explores situations where Bhabha's theory of hybridity sheds light on everyday politics. Overall, I aim to bring Bhabha's work into the world of plain English for the first time,

and also to question its political effects. This is important in appreciating and drawing on the strengths of his work, as much as in breaking the aura of authority which often surrounds them.



Different kinds of readers will therefore find different sections useful. Readers are encouraged to reflect on whether they are more interested in my exegesis of Bhabha, my critique, or both, and whether they are interested mainly in Bhabha's critical theory or his politics. Readers interested mainly in understanding Bhabha should focus on chapters 2, 3, 5, 7 and 8, and to a lesser extent 12-15. Students looking to understand the most-used aspects of Bhabha's theory are encouraged to focus on chapters 5, 7 and 8 (dealing with hybridity, difference and colonialism). Students and scholars with more of an interest in the underlying theoretical assumptions of Bhabha's poststructuralism/postcolonialism are encouraged to focus on chapters 2-3. The critical chapters will be less useful for them. Political activists of whatever stripe, interested in Bhabha's political implications, might prefer to skip straight to chapters 10-16. They might also want to familiarise themselves with Bhabha's ontology first. Scholars engaged in critical dialogue about Bhabha are more likely to find the critical chapters (4, 6, 9, 16) and the political chapters (10-15) the most interesting. They will only need to use the exegetical chapters if they want to understand why I've interpreted Bhabha a particular way. I have also interspersed the text with background discussions of the sources of some of Bhabha's ideas and of other issues

which intersect with his work. I expect these to be very useful for some readers, and unnecessary for others. They are designed for students looking to understand Bhabha. Some are also used to show why I think Bhabha is wrong about particular issues, or why I think his work overlaps with other theories or political forces.



So, who is Homi Bhabha? I believe that theories can be better understood through the configuration of concepts, empirical examples, and motivating questions than through the biographies of authors. However, Bhabha belongs to a tradition of philosophy which insists on “situating oneself” as an important part of political practice. So here's a brief introduction to his life. Bhabha is an Indian academic who has spent most of his life in Britain and America. He was born in Mumbai (then known as Bombay), around the time India became independent from Britain. Mumbai was formerly a trading city built by the English East India Company and is now the capital of the state of Maharashtra. This sprawling metropolis in western India today has a population of around 20 million and is the largest city in India. Bhabha went to university in Mumbai in the tumultuous years of the 1960s-70s global protest wave. He was presumably exposed to, and some of his writings hint that he was involved in, the Marxist-inflected radicalism of the period.

Bhabha moved to England for his postgraduate studies, and obtained a series of academic posts at different universities both there and in America. He later recounts: 'I felt rather out of place, not because I felt a stranger... but... I discovered that I knew a certain kind of England only too well... I felt that things were utterly familiar and utterly estranged. I

returned to Bombay, developed a hypocondriacal illness, and missed the next term' (PN3, 68-9). England (and later Britain) was the colonial power which formerly ruled India. In the 1980s, Bhabha wrote a series of articles on the importance of difference, hybridity, mimicry and internal subversion of dominant texts. In these articles, he adapted poststructuralist ideas (drawn from French theorists such as Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser and Gilles Deleuze) to understanding anti-colonial resistance, migration, minority politics, and a range of other issues connected to colonialism and race. By the 1990s he had become something of a cult figure (alongside Edward Saïd and Gayatri Spivak) in the rapidly growing field of postcolonial studies. His major writings were collected and expanded in his book *The Location of Culture*, published in 1994. He has not published any books since then, but he has continued to write occasional articles, reviews and interviews for academic journals and cultural periodicals.

Bhabha comes from the Parsi ethnic group, an Indian Zoroastrian community known for its middleman or elite role under colonialism. The Parsis are themselves transnational and hybrid, perhaps explaining Bhabha's theoretical preferences. Although the name 'Parsi' means 'Persian', Parsis have been settled in India for 1500 years, though some are now part of the Indian diaspora. In the interview 'Translator Translated', Bhabha describes the Parsis as 'the middle persons between various Indian communities and the British' (TT 31). In another interview, Bhabha suggests that 'Parsis were amongst the most prominent creators of urban modernity in India'. They have made a 'disproportionate contribution' despite being a minority (DH, n.p.). Significantly, Bhabha talks about modernity in India in terms of 'contribution', rather than colonisation. Parsis 'became the middle man' between coloniser and colonised, because they were able to 'play in the interstices'. Since they were not Muslim, Hindu or Christian, they could 'bridge those differences to their advantage'. However, they are a culture with 'missing parts'. The Parsi lifeworld is 'hugely cosmopolitan' and the Parsi experience is 'really so much about interstitial negotiations' (DH, n.p.). Parsis, he adds, are 'a network, and the Parsi community is about the contingent and interstitial nature of the contemporary world' (DH, n.p.).

In Bhabha's framing, therefore, Parsis are not only hybrids. They are also central to Indian modernisation. Elsewhere, however, Bhabha conflates modernity with colonialism (see below, 145). Bhabha's stereotype of Parsis is that they are a successful minority who use inbetweenness to survive and flourish. This may underestimate the wealth and power of the more successful members of the group. According to one source, the nineteenth-century Parsis were 'the foremost people in India in matters educational, industrial and social. They came in the vanguard of progress [and] amassed vast fortunes' (Dhalla, 1938:483). Parsis are also overrepresented in India's tiny elite of corporate dynasties, among them the massive Tata conglomerate, which now owns Jaguar and Land Rover. The role of companies like Tata is significantly more than a "middleman" position. They are at the cutting edge of the "dewesternised" variety of capitalism. They have also been involved in land grabs which have caused mass protests in rural India (Ghosh, 2018). One should not, of course, extrapolate from rich individuals to entire groups. But such examples are revealing in regard to how Bhabha conceives his positionality. Tata are not representative of the Parsi group, but it is worrying if this is what Bhabha has in mind as a successful contribution to Indian modernisation. He also does not mention that Parsis are disappearing as an ethnic group. There are only around 60,000 Parsis alive today (Krishnan, 2017; Pressly, 2015).

The history of Parsis helps situate Bhabha's interest in inbetweenness and hybridity. It also suggests, however, that this interest reflects the role of an intermediary stratum, not of the subaltern (the oppressed or worse-off) as such. It has also been suggested that Bhabha's interest in hybridity, like that of the author Salman Rushdie whom Bhabha often cites, stems from his minority status. The social enforcement of racial hierarchies in India is resisted in his work through a discourse on hybridity. This discourse also draws on the heritage of Mahatma Gandhi, who saw political freedom as bridging the pure and the impure (Young, 2001:349). Indeed, there is a long history of non-dualist thought in India (and in many parts of the world). The idea of non-dualism (*Advaita* or *Advaya*) is present in the Hindu Vedas and in Buddhism, which was founded in India. Bhabha stands in a

long tradition of Indian scholars who seek to use theory and writing to promote non-dual consciousness. However, his Lacanian/Derridean, negativity-inflected version of non-dualism is very different from traditional non-dualism. Non-dualists generally see the universe as unseparated and continuous (similar to the 'univocity of being' in Spinoza and Deleuze). They seek to create consciousness of the oneness of everything, including the nonexistence of oneself as a separate self. In contrast, Bhabha follows from a European tradition which views the universe as constitutively split. He rejects the pursuit of experiences of fullness and presence.



These biographical details tell the reader little about the inspirations for Bhabha's work or the reasons for its success. His status as a highly culturally literate scholar of Indian origin is certainly relevant to his popularity in postcolonial studies. His Parsi background may explain his focus on mimicry by colonised elites and his relative neglect of India's majority Hindu culture and its classical texts. His biography gives a personal slant to his interest in migration, marginality and living between cultures. However, his work, like every text, is intertextual. It contains influences and traces of other texts and social situations which are brought into it. A book, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue, is a rhizome, a network of different concepts and points of reference which trail off in different directions, outside the book itself. A book or a theory is also a machine – a set of components which work together to produce particular effects.

Bhabha did not invent the style in which he writes. His style is largely imitated from Derrida. He invents new names for the types of inbetweenness he studies – hybridity, third space, time-lag, etc. But the way he theorises inbetweenness follows closely from the poststructuralist approach, especially Derrida and Lacan. His work is also closely related to particular contexts, even when these are not directly discussed. Bhabha's text is a product of disillusionment with Marxism and liberalism, of the state-sponsored multiculturalism of the 1980s, the legacy of 1968, the Anglophone reception of French ideas, the processes of decolonisation and anti-colonial critique, and the neoliberal period of capitalism – at least as much as it is a product of Bhabha himself or his postcolonial social position. This book, therefore, is not just about Bhabha. It is about the problem-field Bhabha creates and/or works within, and it is about the multiple strands of history and theory which cluster together in Bhabha's writings.



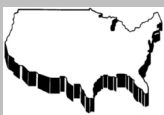
Postcolonial theory is a fusion of Anglophone poststructuralism with theories of colonialism. Anglophone poststructuralism is an adaptation of various distinct French theories of the 1960s-70s, which are sometimes grouped together as poststructuralism. Theories of colonialism are taken from anti-colonial theorists such as Fanon and Saïd, American critical race theory, and the Subaltern Studies Group in India.

1940s-50s



The Global South: The Second World War weakened the power of European imperial rulers. India won independence from Britain in 1947. The anti-colonial Congress Party took power. Remaining colonies in Africa and Asia began to rise in

revolt. France fought a long war against the Algerian independence movement, the FLN. Widespread use of torture, massacres, and racism led to controversy in France. European colonisers suffered a series of defeats in Vietnam, Egypt, Indonesia and elsewhere. By the late 1950s, France and Britain began to withdraw from most of their remaining colonies. Decolonisation – the rejection of colonial rule and western imperialism by colonised peoples – changed the field of theory in France, America and Europe, as well as the former colonies. Frantz Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952. Dependency theory argued that western power in independent countries in Latin America constitutes a new form of colonialism: the extraction of resources to aid development of rich countries at the expense of poor countries. Newly independent “Third World” countries attempted to create a third camp outside the Cold War superpowers, the “non-aligned movement”. Homi Bhabha was born in Mumbai (then known as Bombay), in Maharashtra, India, in 1949.



US and Britain: Europe and America were locked in the Second World War (1939-45) followed by the Cold War between the west and the Soviet Union (1948-89). The US went through a period of intense anti-communist reaction and witch-hunts, known as McCarthyism. As a result, radical theories were marginalised in US academia. Conservative, social-engineering approaches predominated: positivism, behaviourism, operationalism, functionalism. Black Americans imported anti-colonial ideas to resist internal colonialism and racism. The Civil Rights Movement, opposing discrimination, disenfranchisement and segregation of black Americans, began in 1954. British academia was less politically restricted, but largely conservative. 'Theory' tended to be rejected in favour of empiricism and logical positivism. The type of self-confident 'modern reason' attacked by poststructuralists and postcolonial theorists was strong in Anglophone (English-speaking) academia in the 1950s.



France: During World War II, France was occupied by Nazi Germany and the collaborationist Vichy regime. The French Resistance fought the Nazis, led by the nationalist Charles de Gaulle and the Communist Party. In the Cold War, France ended up in the US-led western camp, but the Communists remained popular and there was a lot of anti-American feeling in France. France was also locked in a series of imperialist wars to retain or retake territories which had mostly been overrun during World War II. The biggest of these wars was the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962). French electoral politics in the 1950s is often described as unstable. In 1958, armed attacks on the French government by white French settlers from Algeria and sections of the French army caused a constitutional crisis. De Gaulle was allowed to take power, and create a more authoritarian constitution. He ended the Algerian war by 1962 – but not before French police had massacred dozens if not hundreds of Algerian protesters in Paris.

France was rapidly emerging as the world “capital” of critical theory by the 1950s. Structuralism, existentialism and Hegelian (or “humanist”) Marxism were at this stage the dominant traditions in French thought. French intellectuals were often politically progressive, sympathetic to communism, and publicly vocal. Structuralism maintained that human actions can best be understood as effects of determinant social structures, particularly language. These structures were considered to be 'binary', using two-term, on-off, black-white pairings like in computer science.

1960s-70s



Global South: Decolonisation continued apace. Algeria won independence in 1962. Anti-colonial theory emerged as a significant force. Frantz Fanon, a French-speaking black intellectual from Martinique (a French colony in the Caribbean), wrote *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961. Fanon studied in France, trained as a psychoanalyst, and adopted many of the then-prevalent critical theories. He modified these theories to understand racism and colonialism. He actively worked for the FLN, the Algerian anti-colonial resistance. Early anti-colonial theorists such as Fanon, Memmi, Césaire and Senghor were closely associated with the anti-colonial movement, and some went on to become political rulers. They often used a mixture of Marxism, existentialism, revolutionary humanism and nationalism – very different from the later poststructuralist orientation of postcolonial theory. Struggles continued against recalcitrant colonial and racist regimes in countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), Palestine, Angola and Mozambique. America fought, and lost, an imperialist war against communist guerrillas in Vietnam. China went through a top-down 'Cultural Revolution' targeting bureaucrats. Although stemming from disputes within the Communist Party leadership, the Revolution mobilised mass support among students in China and inspired Maoists worldwide. Marxist guerrilla movements spread in Latin America. Many Southern countries became dictatorships, either after revolutions or in an

attempt by established elites and armies to suppress the revolutionary upsurge. American covert operations and reactionary local forces led to the installation of brutal, sometimes genocidal military dictatorships in countries like Indonesia, Chile, Greece, Argentina, the Philippines, Congo/Zaire and Pakistan. On a global scale, the 'Third World' bloc raised a series of demands for global economic change. In 1973, the mainly Arab oil-producing companies shut down exports to countries which were supporting Israel in a war against Arab countries, including America and Britain. Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* was published in 1978.



India: The patronage systems set up after independence were challenged by increasingly forceful popular movements, including trade unions, student movements, armed rebellions, minorities such as Sikhs and Dalits, and electorally successful leftist parties. In 1967, a Maoist insurgency started in the village of Naxalbari, giving birth to the 'Naxalite' guerrilla movement which still exists today. Attempts to contain the left culminated in a repressive 'state of emergency' (1975-77) during which political dissidents were jailed. This was ended by an election in 1977 when the Congress Party lost for the first time, to a coalition of Congress dissidents, socialists and Hindu communalists. In a climate of radicalism, Subaltern Studies emerged in Indian academia as a modification of Marxism to Indian conditions. Subaltern Studies scholars such as Ranajit Guha explored why India did not go through a Marxist revolution in the colonial period. This led to sustained inquiry into peasant resistance and colonial power. Many later postcolonial theorists were part of this group. Homi Bhabha graduated from the University of Bombay in 1970, and then moved to England to study at Oxford University.



US and Britain: The American civil rights movement brought anti-colonial struggle to the US heartland. American cities erupted in revolt in 1968. The Black Panther Party campaigned against racism on a Maoist platform in the 1960s-70s, before being repressed. This was also the peak era of the New Left, radical countercultures, the anti-war movement, the student movement, 'second wave' feminism, and gay liberation movements in America and Europe. Some American universities created departments specialising in race and gender. American radical theory increasingly came to focus on race, gender and other types of oppression, instead of the earlier Marxist focus on class and capitalism. Many leading theorists of this period were veterans of social movements. In Britain, Marxism and radical approaches became prominent in academia for the first time. Like the rest of the world, Britain experienced a wave of radical social movements, including punk and hippy subcultures, militant workers' strikes, and women's liberation and peace movements.



France: In 1968, France was in a state of near-revolution. Students and workers occupied parts of Paris and battled police. New theories such as Situationism played a contested role in the revolt. In an attempt to contain revolt, the government created a new university focused on emerging radical theories. The classical texts of poststructuralism were generally written in this period, including Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*, and Foucault's *Order of Things*, *Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish*. Poststructuralist theory largely expresses and carries forward the energies of the 1960s/70s revolts, criticising and moving beyond the deadening orthodoxies of structuralism, orthodox Marxism and positivism. Most poststructuralists considered themselves revolutionaries of a sort. However, they were discontented with the Communist Party which they saw as betraying the 1968 revolt.

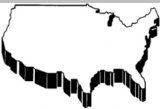
1980s



Global South: By the 1980s, the hopes raised by decolonisation had largely faded. Neoliberalism was now economically dominant. Most countries were trapped in neocolonialism, reinforced by the debt trap and Structural Adjustment Policies. Most anti-colonial regimes had degenerated into corrupt, authoritarian dictatorships. The development of East Asian 'newly industrialised countries' and the new-found wealth of oil producers split the 'Third World' bloc, to the benefit of western power. Postcolonial theory in its current sense began to develop, formulated by a new intellectual elite in or from the former colonies. Most of Bhabha's major articles appeared in the 1980s, along with Gayatri Spivak's early works.



France: The hopes of 1968 had dissipated. Poststructuralism was in decline, eclipsed by the conservative anti-communist *Nouveau Philosophes*. Some poststructuralists, such as Foucault and Lyotard, became more conservative and anti-communist in the 1980s. Foucault died of AIDS in 1984, a victim of a scourge which was impacting on the gay rights and sexual liberation movements worldwide. With a socialist government (from 1981), France did not feel the brunt of neoliberalism until the 1990s. Identity issues did not achieve prominence in France until later still (although a distinctly French feminism emerged in the 1970s-80s). Deleuze, Baudrillard and Derrida all continued to write through the 1980s and into the 1990s. Most major works of poststructuralism appeared in English for the first time in the 1980s.



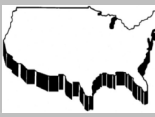
US and Britain: Reactionary, authoritarian-populist, neoliberal governments held power. Radical theory in academia was under siege. Changes in university structures made life hard for Marxist academics. However, support and patronage from left-leaning local governments and universities promoted the institutionalisation of the subset of

radical theories based on marginalised groups. State-sanctioned multiculturalism became the norm. Poststructuralism began to be “imported” for the first time. Its original radical force was often lost in translation. English-speaking authors put a liberal or conservative spin on poststructuralist ideas, using them mainly to undercut Marxist approaches and replace them as the main form of radical academic theory. (Hatreds dating back to this period still persist between poststructuralist and Marxist academics). In America, poststructuralism was often fused with race and gender studies in the new field of “cultural studies”. In Britain, it was promoted by former radicals such as the (confusingly named) *Marxism Today* group (see below, Ch. 12). These theorists elaborated the idea that the world was now in 'New Times', where the old rules of class struggle no longer apply. In both America and Britain, poststructuralism and identity politics became closely entwined, as alternatives both to Marxism and to neoliberalism. Bhabha was loosely affiliated with *Marxism Today*. He moved to London and taught in Brighton in the 1980s. Many of the events discussed in his work, such as the Rushdie affair, took place in the 1980s.

1990s



Global South: Postcolonial theory developed into a recognised field of thought. It achieved visibility and acolytes worldwide. Many of Bhabha's essays were collected in a book in 1994. The collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) led to liberal triumphalism. Unchallenged economic power allowed the west to impose extensive 'conditionalities' on poorer countries. However, the social costs of neoliberalism were becoming clearer. In the face of widespread revolts, the west incorporated anti-poverty and social justice rhetoric in its structural adjustment agenda. Fundamentalism and state breakdown became more common. Southern governments began to use postcolonial arguments for strategic purposes. Bhabha's fame peaked.



US and Europe: Anti-oppression issues were increasingly “mainstreamed”. This period saw the rise of the 'post-Washington Consensus' and the 'Third Way', which sought to retain neoliberalism while also addressing issues such as poverty and racism. In practice, this did not substantially alter the neoliberal agenda. Welfare rights continued to be eroded, and industry was largely replaced by service, finance and cultural industries. Minority rights, considered from a liberal point of view, became increasingly prominent in the 1990s. However, radical approaches were increasingly marginalised or recuperated in academia. Social movements continued to resist neoliberalism, culminating in the massive anti-capitalist protests of 1999-2001. Bhabha moved to America in 1992, lecturing at Princeton, Dartmouth and Chicago. In 1994, his magnum opus, *The Location of Culture*, was published. It contains many of his earlier articles. According to Google Scholar, the book has been cited in over 37,000 other texts.

2000s-2010s



Global: The 9/11 attacks (2001) were followed by increasingly aggressive western imperialism and a partial undercutting of the previous 'inclusion' agenda. America began an apparently endless global war waged mainly in the global South. Multiculturalism was abandoned or attacked in many countries. Surviving anti-discrimination measures were yoked to an increasingly intolerant and securitised public culture. Academia both expanded, and became more McDonaldised. The new economy underwent a brief boom before crashing in the financial crisis of 2008. Neoliberalism has been hobbling along ever since. Postcolonial theory remained fashionable as it had plenty to say about the new imperial order. The economic rise of China and India further blurred North-South binaries. Social structures in many countries became increasingly authoritarian and intolerant. However, top-down support for the academic inclusion of postcolonial and other identity-related theories continued.

The tone of identity politics often became complacently Third Way, adapting to a securitised context by leveraging ideas of vulnerability, safety and harassment and dropping any remaining Marxisant (Marxist-like) or revolutionary dispositions. However, its tone once more became increasingly strident from the late 2000s, as academic patronage was reduced and conflicts with an exclusionary racist system intensified. Postcolonial ideas began to be popularised on social media, along with other 'social justice' or 'anti-oppression' theories. Bhabha admitted feeling out-of-place in a post-multicultural world in the 2000s. After a brief return to London, he received a position at Harvard University, one of America's most prestigious colleges.

Ontology and Politics

The most basic aspect of a philosophical theory is usually its ontology and epistemology – what kinds of things it believes exist, and how people can know about them. Bhabha's most basic ontological view is that ambiguity or ambivalence is a constitutive aspect of language and reality. In many ways this is an article of faith, but it has an entire philosophy behind it, drawn rather loosely from Derrida and Lacan. For these poststructuralist authors, language is at the heart of social life, and human experiences of the world. Yet it is fundamentally split and ambiguous. Things aren't really distinct things at all. First off, they are 'social constructs', affected by ways of seeing. Secondly, these constructions are themselves ambivalent, because the different constructions are relative to one another. Language creates an illusion of certainty. However, in fact, it depends on ambiguity. Words only have meanings in relation to other words. For example, the word “black” only has meaning because it is distinguished from the words “white”, “grey”, “red” and so on. Language also splits up the holistic field of reality. Everything is really part of a single flow of “becoming”, or process – but we can only think about it through particular

categories. Bhabha's project is, above all, about emphasising constitutive ambiguity. By using constitutive ambiguity, Bhabha believes that we can destabilise oppressive systems such as colonialism. Cultural difference, anti-colonial struggles, and minority narratives, are valuable because they come from and draw attention to constitutive ambiguity. This, in a nutshell, is Bhabha's theory.

But does this lead to an effective emancipatory politics for oppressed groups? As we shall see, I question whether it does. In many ways, the underlying ontology is conservative. In addition, the ontology affects Bhabha's style, and his way of engaging with other positions. There is a closure, circularity, and repetitiveness to Bhabha's work which persist even after his obscure prose is peeled back. His work is extremely resistant to dialogue. There is little in his work to convince critics that constitutive ambiguity exists, or that it is crucial to understanding colonialism or anti-colonialism. Rather, he repeatedly assumes what he tries to show. He creates a relatively self-enclosed discourse, resilient against anything outside it. Among the features of this discourse are a belief in the transformative power of theory and writing as such, a hostility to antagonistic and reconciliatory political approaches, and an emphasis on endless disruption of meaning as a form of resistance to power, which is assumed to rest on such meaning.



Bhabha's political significance is debated. He is broadly on the left of the political spectrum, with a possible connection to the *Marxism Today*/New Times group (see Chapter 12). However, he is generally critical of socialism, particularly Marxism. He is associated with poststructuralism (also known as postmodernism) and “identity politics”,

particularly the 1980s/90s forms (which are different from those common today). Supporters suggest that he has supported campaigns around race, class and migration and engaged with black and minority communities of criticism (Byrne, 2009:2). In one account, Bhabha suggests that he is a former radical - 'was the moral fervor of my youth so misconceived?' (SBS, 343). He maintains fidelity to his older concerns with race and class, in the face of those who maintain that such issues are "just history" in the era of globalisation. However, he is also associated with existing dominant power structures. For example, Bhabha has presented at the World Economic Forum in Davos (Byrne, 2009:xi), probably while others on the streets outside were trying to shut it down.

Opponents maintain that postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha articulate ideas which are coextensive with contemporary forms of capitalist power. Postcolonial theory is a self-contained, self-referential space. For instance, Hallward argues that postcolonialism frees criticism from any connection to concrete issues. It releases critique into 'thin air' (2001:xiv). It is only able to do this because of the defeat or corruption of radical and anti-colonial movements. In other words, postcolonial theory is both a continuation of anti-colonialism, and its recuperation or capture in normalised academic practice. This line of critique will be examined in more detail later (see below, 809-907).

Bhabha's Style and its Critics

Before discussing the content of Bhabha's theory, it is important to take note of his unusual style. This style generates a number of difficulties, of which misunderstandings and failure to comprehend are only two. The relationship between writer and reader is also one of the problems. Like modernist authors such as Samuel Beckett, Bhabha breaks or rejects the usual implied perception of the roles of writer and reader. Usually an author presents a view of reality which is framed as true, or a linear fictional narrative which imitates truth. Either way, prose aims to be meaningful and believable. Since modernists

and postmodernists object to ideas of truth, and to faith in the authority of authors and the passivity of readers, they dislike this usual way of writing. Some seek to write texts which frustrate readers' expectations. Others seek to write texts which give readers the freedom to interpret them in different ways. Bhabha seems mainly to take the former approach. He argues that theorists continually construct their constituencies. The writer constructs the reader, as well as the object or value transmitted in the writing (SPD, 369). This leads to a position which denies autonomy to Bhabha's readers. In effect, the writer dominates the reader. Furthermore, rhetoric is basic to language, which in turn is basic to knowledge and subjectivity (LC, 23). And language is more basic than senses, such as vision (LC, 49-50). The world is actually textual, not visual. And this means that, for Bhabha, rhetorical manipulation actually produces social change.



It is rare for Bhabha to present arguments which seek to persuade in conventional ways – for instance, by offering an argument for a point of view in opposition to other points of view, backed by evidence or reasoning. If he seeks to persuade, it is mainly by rhetoric. However, this is not the kind of rhetoric which provides emotional force through inspiration and commitment. Rather, it is mainly designed to confuse, disrupt and estrange readers' assumptions. Moore-Gilbert describes Bhabha's style as 'clotted' and 'extremely dense' (1997:115). In partial defence of this approach, Bhabha claims that theorists don't build up models from first principles in a calm state. Instead, they come up against shocking moments which inspire them to theorise ('IT', S2). He also works in the shadows of his own denial that there is a unitary, totalising, dominant system which can be resisted

from the outside (a Marxist or anarchist political model). Instead, he seeks to work with a model of a socio-linguistic system which is so deep that it shapes everyone's basic motivations, and yet is also internally split. Yet this position makes it difficult to create an equal dialogue with opponents.

Bhabha's work tends to put form before content, and sometimes seems incomprehensible to critics. According to Olson and Worsham (SPD), Bhabha has always been fascinated by word choice and careful crafting of writing. Bhabha says that he is doing theory '*by* doing a certain kind of writing' (SPD, 363). His ontology, or "idea", shapes and enacts his rhetoric. Writing "stages" an idea in an almost theatrical sense. Writing of his history of creative writing, Bhabha says that he was always 'enchanted by the form and the activity', becoming absorbed in questions of word choice (SPD, 363). I think this reveals a lot about Bhabha's work. Often, he subordinates substance to form. He produces aesthetic formulations which show off his abilities, at the expense of comprehension and communication. In one interview, Bhabha rejects particular views simply because they are 'passé' or 'boring', not because they are falsified (DH, n.p.); he often writes about what he is interested in, as if this is a mere matter of aesthetic preference, and not a political choice he needs to justify. In criticisms along these lines, Perloff refers to Bhabha's approach as an 'oratorical collage' which subordinates argument to exhortation (2001:110). She calls it a 'ceremonial oratory of display', more manifesto than argument, aiming to incite emotions rather than provide reasons (2001:124).

My reading of Bhabha is unapologetically direct and literal. I am mainly interested in the substance of his arguments. However, his supporters may see this as a misreading. I believe his style largely reflects the same concerns as the substance of his text. It seeks difficulty, repetition, paradox, and frustration of meaning, without making a case for why we should value these effects. It's a stylistic version of begging the question. However, the basic ontology involves substantive claims which can be formulated and criticised like any others.

His failure to provide justification for his ideas does not mean Bhabha's work is meaningless. On the contrary, his style and substance both point to a particular ethic and aesthetic: the frustration of meaning. According to this conception, meaning (especially overly-certain or overly-confident meaning) is a tool of power. It leads to violence, colonialism and silencing. And it creates an illusory sense that "subjects" (individuals, agents, people) are "self-present" or exist in a substantive sense. From a Derridean or Lacanian point of view (two varieties of poststructuralism), this belief is unhealthy. People are always in fact split, lacking, multiple, and driven by invisible unconscious forces. As I have shown elsewhere (Robinson, 2005), antagonism and irreconcilability are desirable according to Lacanian theory. The recognition and celebration of ambivalence is necessary so as to show fidelity to the basic ontological nature of existence. Bhabha embraces this aspect of Lacan's theory, without all of its theoretical underpinnings. According to Young, Bhabha treats Lacanian categories almost as 'truth or actuality' (1990:194). This is despite the fact that they are western categories, and despite the fact that Bhabha does not use them in their original, clinical psychoanalytic context. When Bhabha uses Lacanian terms, they are effectively analogical concepts. Bhabha also neglects the centrality of sexual difference in Lacan. How, Young argues, 'can you talk about structures of desire in psychoanalytic terms outside the structures of sexuality?' (1990:195). The exercise renders Lacanian theory less substantial than it is in Lacan's own work.

Bhabha did not invent the idea that lack, antagonism or ambivalence are '**constitutive**', necessary features of identity and meaning. The idea has its roots in the poststructuralism of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida (see below, 88-96). It stems from the structuralist idea that language is a structure of **binary oppositions**. Words have meanings only in relation to other words which they are defined against. For example, if everything was alive, then the idea of "life" would have no meaning. The word "life" only has meaning if it is contrasted with "death" or "inert objects". "Life" has to be defined against its other, "death". In Lacanian theory, this idea gains a particular nuance by being combined with Freud's psychoanalysis. According to Lacan, people undergo a fundamental change when they gain the ability to speak. They no longer live in a world of immanence with other things. They miss this earlier immanence – or what they imagine it to be – and experience it as lost. But in fact, it is something lacking. People who have entered into language can never be complete or 'self-present', because, like all linguistic categories, they are defined in relation to an 'other'.

From this point of view, scarcity, alienation, antagonism, and a whole series of apparently soluble problems are actually effects of this basic, irreducible lack of completeness. It's just a fact of life – and something we shouldn't try to deny or fight. A successful Lacanian 'cure' happens when the patient accepts that s/he and the world are necessarily incomplete, imperfect, and bound to fail – and recognises that s/he doesn't really exist as a 'subject', but rather, is just a 'void' in language. Lacanians call this position "radical". But it is not necessarily politically radical. Rather, it carries shades here of the conservative criticism of 'do-gooders' who just can't stand to recognise the harsh realities of the world and the necessity for nasty responses such as state brutality. Denial of constitutive lack, especially when combined with a belief in an accessible empirical reality and in distinct individual selves, is often dismissed by Lacanians as 'liberalism' or 'essentialism' (c.f. below, Ch. 13).

Politically, constitutive lack is rather a conservative idea. It counsels that we shouldn't try to overcome antagonism by building peace, or smash capitalism to destroy alienation, or fight against outer oppressions to create a world free from oppression. These are all “fantasy” responses based on the illusion that things can be made right. In an earlier piece on the political theory of constitutive lack (Robinson, 2005), I engaged with widespread adoption of this idea of constitutive lack by theorists such as Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. I argue that the idea of constitutive lack is not as 'anti-essentialist' as its proponents maintain. Instead, it functions as a kind of *essence* which explains everything else. It is a new conception of an essence, which is used to ground or provide foundations for various claims. It is dressed-up as a negative concept or a void, but its theoretical function is that of a particular object, designated with definite nouns.

Like other essentialist categories, constitutive lack is treated as true in advance. It does not stem from or contribute to interaction with the world in all its complexity and contingency. It is very similar to the '*myths*' described by Roland Barthes (1972). A Barthesian myth is a purely linguistic schema which is projected from outside onto social and empirical phenomena. It functions in such a way as to block thought. In practice, Lacanian writers often reduce contingent instances of antagonism and scarcity to the idea of constitutive lack, even when they might be contingent and soluble. Rather than a contingent series of distinct lacks, each instance of lack is taken as an example of a general, essential 'lackness'. This involves a consistent bias towards assuming something which is unavailable today is impossible, and that a desire for it is pathological. While Laclau and Mouffe are 'radical democrats', a Lacanian living before the French Revolution would probably conclude that democracy is an impossible fantasy of absent fullness. This should be borne in mind when one considers Lacanians' criticisms of the possibilities for workplace democracy, stateless societies, universal human rights, and so on.

The reification of lack leads to a rupture between form and content. At the level of content, Lacanian and deconstructive theorists emphasise the acceptance and celebration of contingency. At the level of form, they utterly foreclose contingency through the use of a rigid structural analysis which permits no exceptions. The idea of constitutive lack reintroduces the idea of a neutral, universal point of view, through the back-door. In my work on this topic, I also contrast the positive force associated with 'negativity' or 'antagonism' or 'the Real' in these theories with the phrase 'I don't know' – a kind of negativity which is not turned into a positive entity. I suggest that this kind of theory reifies things people don't know into positive entities which are treated much like known things or forces. This way of phrasing things gives a misleading impression of knowledge. The conservatism of this point of view – its tendency to treat all present lacks as 'constitutive' and insoluble – has political consequences. Even if they want a revolution, like Žižek does, Lacanians are required to posit a post-revolutionary society which continues to maintain some of the most objectionable features of the present system.

The structure of such a theory is very different from those of theories more clearly connected to progressive social change. Radical theorists – ranging from Karl Marx to Max Stirner to John Zerzan, from Hardt and Negri to Hakim Bey and the Situationists, and even Deleuze and Guattari – maintain that alienation and scarcity are contingent, not constitutive. Getting rid of certain generative structures in the social world will also get rid of the necessity for everyone to be miserable. For instance Reich argued that images of essential negativity – such as the Devil – are actually personalised representations of repressed desires. Reich's approach to psychoanalysis, unlike Lacan's, leads to a need for social and sexual revolution. Here and elsewhere (Robinson and Tormey, 2009a), I also suggest that the idea of constitutive antagonism leads to naturalisation of the state. It is

assumed that every society requires a state – but in fact, stateless societies have existed, and stateless social movements exist today. Constitutive lack is a good excuse for political authority, because it means that somebody violently suppressing others is a necessary part of social life.

I am sceptical of the reductive focus on nonexistent subjects and their supposed structural conditions in deconstructive theories such as Bhabha's. However, I am also sceptical of the uncritical idea of an obvious 'reality' found in currently fashionable 'evidence-based' approaches. I prefer theories – such as Deleuze and Guattari's 'nomad sciences', Alfred Korzybski's stress on the irreducibility of unique phenomena to linguistic categories, and Clifford Geertz's idea of 'thick description' as a means to achieve qualitative understanding – which recognise both virtual (linguistic, ideal, structural, affective, unconscious) and actual (empirical, corporeal, event-level, worldly) phenomena. In my view, positivism is flawed in recognising only an external, worldly reality, and denying the power of images and concepts. The constructivist critique – that social meanings inflect what can be seen or experienced, that invisible meanings affect observable events in decisive ways, and that 'the same thing' can be seen differently depending on which of several equally valid points of view one holds – is basically sound. But deconstruction often bends the stick too far the other way. It recognises only a virtual, conceptual or structural reality, and confuses the outer world for this reality. This is, paradoxically, also what stereotypes and Barthesian 'myths' do. 'In reducing 'subjects' to effects of the social structure, deconstruction makes itself unable to tell the stereotype from the actual person. In fact, both virtual and actual exist. As Deleuze argues, humans exist at the intersection between the virtual and the actual. Both are necessary parts of meaning-making.

Bhabha's style is arguably intended to be anti-authoritarian. Bhabha assumes that a clear, direct, literal communication style (such as mine) entails a strong claim to authoritativeness or truth. In contrast, an elusive, poetic style undermines such claims. He has a particular prejudice against decisive, adversarial forms of language such as political polemics, although he also engages in polemical denunciations of perceived adversaries (see below, 811-907). As a result of his prejudice against directness, he develops a position of seeking to frustrate the formation of fixed meanings. Presence and completion are undesirable (and impossible). Rather, one is supposed to remain forever in a situation of ambiguity between distinct positions which cannot be unified or harmonised. Hence, Bhabha does not seek to build a 'general theory', but to maintain a 'productive tension' (LC, 170). He sees understanding as an 'emergence', something which comes gradually, not an 'origin', something one starts from (SPD, 365). This position reflects Bhabha's Lacanian and Derridean underpinnings, in which the process of identity-construction is itself characterised by an inner rupture.

It may also reflect an existentialist heritage. The method of indirect communication is derived from the Danish existentialist Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard believed that meaning, or values, in life have little to do with objective facts. Subjective "truths" could not be proven, but only accepted by each person on a more-or-less irrational basis. Because of this claim, he developed a method of communicating in roundabout, paradoxical, sometimes absurd formulations. This approach influenced later writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett and Jacques Derrida, and through them, authors like Bhabha. For Kierkegaard, the self *is* its values and meanings – so an existential choice of values is an instance of self-destruction and self-redefinition at the same time. This is similar to how Bhabha sees the process of social change, and his method draws strongly on indirect communication. Kierkegaard used this style because he believes descriptive knowledge is irrelevant to his concerns. He focuses exclusively on ethics. Bhabha seems to go a step further, seeking to universalise the inappropriateness of descriptive meaning from subjective meaning to all meanings.



I would suggest that this method is more a matter of rhetoric than argument, and it requires an unequal relationship between writer and reader. The *content* of a value often *can* be communicated directly – but the content does not cause the value to be subjectively true for the reader. Kierkegaard, and later Bhabha, is looking, in effect, to proselytise to the reader, and this requires a rhetoric which gets under the reader's guard, tricking them into accepting Kierkegaard's conclusions. The idea is to demolish a reader's assumptions so as to create a space in which the writer's subjective truth becomes apparent. Yet the writer's assumptions are never demolished in the process. They remain what they were at the beginning. This makes sense only if the writer already has “true” subjective consciousness, and the reader has no possibility of decisive reply. We shall see later the effects this has on the relationship between Bhabha and his critics.

In contrast, when interpreting others' writings, Bhabha adopts a Derridean view of textual interpretation in which meaning is produced by the reader, not the writer. This view entails a degree of indifference towards whether a text is being “misread”. This can have creative effects in providing new meanings and exposing previously concealed implications or aspects of texts. However, when combined with a rigid underlying theory, it can also create critique-proof readings which mechanically affirm the reader's prior suppositions. This problem is highlighted by critics of Bhabha. For instance, Perloff accuses Bhabha of incautious, inaccurate readings of authors such as Goethe (2001:110-11). Bhabha

interprets the German author's writings on Italy in terms of the construction of national identity. But Bhabha seems to project this thematic concern onto the text from outside. Goethe wasn't really interested in nationality. A passage Bhabha takes as being about national differences is really about urban-rural, or inter-city differences. Indeed, it hardly even makes sense to think of Italy as a 'nation' in Goethe's day! Italians only began to develop a sense of national identity a century later.

Perloff also questions why Bhabha litters his work with technical theoretical and foreign terms, when (unlike Derrida, Lacan, or Spivak) he is uninterested in etymology (word-origins). She takes it to be a ploy to give an impression of authenticity - a strange tactic when Bhabha rejects authenticity. It tends to reduce the texts considered to the status of a 'mere counter of commodity' (2001:118). Another effect is to provide a pre-emptive rebuttal of critiques. Criticising a similar tactic in deconstructive texts, Foucault calls Derrida an "obscurantist terrorist". He writes so obscurely that readers can't understand him, but if someone criticises him, he replies, 'You didn't understand me, you're an idiot' (Searle et al., 2000). Foucault clearly considers this bad practice. And Bhabha is among many scholars who seem to have picked up this technique.



This aestheticised approach to critical theory leads to imprecise use of theoretical terms. Take for instance the following excerpt from Bhabha's text: 'As a principle of identification, the Other bestows a degree of objectivity, but its representation – be it the social process of the Law or the psychic process of the Oedipus [sic] – is always ambivalent, disclosing a lack' (LC, 51). In this one short, densely packed sentence, Bhabha references Deleuze (and Guattari), Lacan and Derrida. Deleuze and Guattari bring us the critique of representation and of 'Oedipus'; Lacan brings us the Other as principle of identification and constitutive lack, and Derrida brings us ambivalence and the analysis of Law (complete with a capital "L"). To someone familiar with the terminology, this can seem beautiful – a lot of dense meaning woven together. On the level of concepts and meanings, however, it barely holds together at all. Derridean Law is not simply a social process. It is necessarily ambivalent, but not because of the representation of the Other. It is ambivalent because it both avows and disavows justice, which is an appropriate relation to the Other. Lacan's constitutive lack and Derrida's ambivalence are similar but distinct. Bhabha simply merges them together as if they were identical. The Deleuzian critique of representation is a different kind of creature entirely. The generic 'Other' has little role in this critique of representation. Self and other are not co-constituted for Deleuze. Rather, representation is insufficient in relation to molecular flows and processes. Deleuze and Guattari explicitly reject the 'lackist' ontology which is contained in the last part of Bhabha's sentence.

So what, exactly, is Bhabha saying in this sentence? Is he saying that constitutive lack, arising from subject-formation, is constitutive of speech and therefore of law and social life, as in Lacan? Is he saying that speech is ambivalent and deferred, as in Derrida? Or is he saying that representations of others are always insufficient to what others are as molecular processes, as in Deleuze? The three claims are substantially different, but Bhabha neither chooses among them nor demonstrates how they are compatible. If a reader can get past the jargon, they will understand *roughly* what Bhabha means, but they will not be able to reconstruct a *precise* meaning – because there isn't one. Bhabha has

connected several incompatible concepts in an amalgam which doesn't hold together once it's put to use. This passage – and many of Bhabha's – is like an aeroplane with a glass hull and a steam-powered engine. It's combined several parts of different machines which don't functionally work together. It might look beautiful and thought-provoking in an art gallery, but it won't fly, it won't float, and it can't be driven. For a reader seeking to use Bhabha's work politically, to get the machine to “do” something, this is an immense difficulty.

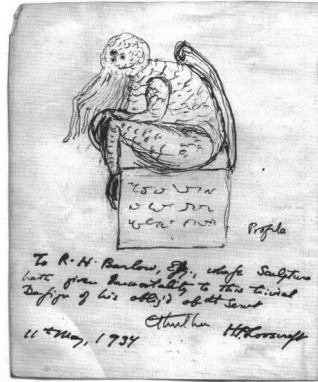


Colonialism is an overarching theme of Bhabha's work. In effect, the theoretical machine Bhabha has built is designed to carry out on 'colonial discourse' the type of deconstruction which Derrida performs on canonical texts of theory. According to Parry, Bhabha seeks to produce immanent critiques of colonial discourse. He writes from within this discourse so as to disrupt it, and displace its position of subjectivity (Parry, 2004:6). He seeks to be tangential to, rather than inside or outside, the dominant discourse (2004:7). For example, in Bhabha's reading of a poem about the Caribbean, colonial power is taken to rest on authoritative naming. Resistance does not take the form of renaming or even reinflecting words. Rather, it consists of a challenge to the subjectivity which names things (Chandra, 2012:205). Postcolonial resistance consists in removing the coloniser from the place of the 'speaking subject' – the person with the power to name things. The power to speak is more important than the content of what is said.

Like most postcolonial theorists, Bhabha sees colonialism as the constitutive underside of modernity. He believes that the good things which supposedly come from modern society (such as modern education, consumer goods, and social stability) are actually effects of

exclusion and exploitation elsewhere. The 'modern subject' – the sense of self that comes from modern society – is founded on exclusions. Colonialism is a repressed aspect of modernity, which keeps returning to unsettle it. It is a kind of internal otherness within modernity. This otherness is forgotten or repressed, but keeps coming back. This means that colonial sites are privileged sites from which modernity can be seen and theorised (Huddart, 2006:63). Bhabha seems to think that race, or colonialism, is the privileged site of struggle. There is a nodal point of the social order – the construction of identity in the inbetween space (see Chapter 5). Minority, subaltern and migrant discourses open up this site. They thus open up the modern/colonial order to change.

Colonialism, or modernity, is assumed to be an all-encompassing discourse within which the reader is automatically situated. As we shall see (Chapter 7), Bhabha sees the modern ego – people's sense of who they are as people, particularly in terms of control and accumulation – as the cause of the problems of the postcolonial world. The ego-destructive effects of the style and content of Bhabha's work are meant to break down the power-holding ego which is at the heart of colonialism. The critical analysis of the west – not of postcolonial countries – is defined as the central task for postcolonial critics (PC 54). Bart Moore-Gilbert calls Bhabha's work 'psychological guerrilla warfare' (1997:130). It strikes at the western ego in the same way guerrillas target an occupying power. Power and knowledge, as Foucault argued, imply one another. By disrupting colonial knowledge, one can disrupt colonial power. For Bhabha, colonial power corresponds to scientific, denotative, direct, literal, certain knowledge. Undermining such knowledge thus undermines the colonial power which this knowledge facilitates or causes. Hence, Bhabha sees poetic form as itself a kind of resistance to colonialism (Huddart, 2006:18). Jin Hee Han portrays Bhabha as a shaman whose magical use of language exorcises ideas such as cultural purity (2005:1). He allows people to imagine a world different from today's neocolonialism. However, he also suggests that Bhabha's writing style mystifies his insights.



There is a logic behind this apparent obscurity. Bhabha believes that *everything* is at root ambiguous, that literal meanings are always more-or-less delusional. He 'performs' this belief by making his style ambiguous, confusing, verbose, and 'messy', and hence, by resisting a precise literal interpretation of what he says. His style seems designed to cause the reader to question whether they have fully understood what he is saying, which in turn both makes the work seem profound, and makes it difficult to write an introduction such as this. It makes a certain amount of sense to see this style as an attack on the reader's ego - on the basis of assumptions that the reader is a western academic, and their ego is part of the reproduction of power. Breaking down the ego is perhaps meant to open the reader to the field of impersonal becoming, of which textual production is an example from a Derridean/Beckettian point of view.

If this is Bhabha's aim, I think this is done much better by accessible Buddhist writers such as Thich Nhat Hanh. In contrast to such authors, Bhabha fails to summon an alternative to the ego, an experience of higher selfhood or immersion in holism. He requires the ego as an accomplice in deciphering his language, and he provokes ego-defences rather than breaking them down. His style is imitated from Derrida (and before him, from Samuel Beckett). In its Derridean form, this style is intended to subvert the structure of conventional language, which is perceived as part of the structure of social oppression. Both Derrida and Beckett also had mystical affiliations, and the use of language at the edges of meaning is a longstanding strategy for pointing to that which

cannot be said. The struggle to understand a densely written, ambiguous, sometimes self-contradictory text is presumably meant to encourage a sublime experience of the similar struggle to approach the unknowable. In my case, it produces frustration – but Bhabha would probably label this symptomatically, as resistance to the unknown. But as we shall see, I don't share his view that knowledge is always bad. I also don't share his view that the topics he's talking about are as unknowable as he suggests.

This idea of Bhabha's purpose is suggested by many of his supporters. According to Huddart, 'Bhabha's own texts can be elusive. They seem to be constantly undermining or frustrating meaning, never quite susceptible to being pinned down'. Whenever a reader thinks they've understood Bhabha, his meaning seems to shift. Bhabha defends this aspect of his work as involving the reader in meaning-production. It is meant to draw the reader into a process of witnessing (Huddart, 2006:9). In other words, Bhabha deliberately tries to frustrate readers, to produce a particular experience of meaning as constantly shifting and deferred. Similarly, his anachronistic way of reading texts is meant to jar readers out of existing assumptions (Huddart, 2006:101). This is partly because, like many poststructuralists, he sees the reader rather than the writer as fundamental to making a text function. Young suggests that Bhabha seeks to disorient any attempts to assert textual authority or produce an effect of closure. In particular, he tries to shift the writing of history away from 'historicist narrative' (1990:198) – i.e. from the type of narrative which writes history as a definite story with some kind of linear progression. His work is, in effect, a constant theoretical-linguistic war against the reader's ego – which Bhabha imagines in line with his own conception of colonial power. By unsettling the reader's ego, Bhabha seeks to unsettle ongoing colonial power-structures.

Bhabha's fans appreciate the ways in which his style resists meaning. Comparing Bhabha and Edward Saïd, Sumit Chakrabarti portrays Bhabha as taking the 'representation debate' to a 'new height' through his 'theoretical anarchism' (2012:5). 'He constructs and cancels, deconstructs and re-constructs at ease, thereby playing the game of representation on a

plane completely removed from Saïd's' (2012:11). His method of disrupting western reason is deliberately 'arbitrary' (2012:6). Chakrabarti suggests that Saïd is objectionable because he succumbs to 'binaries' - a category in which he includes direct, literal concepts in general. Saïd thus left himself open to his arguments being rebutted by reactionaries such as Bernard Lewis. In other words, using direct, literal concepts is dangerous because they can be falsified. Indeed, in Bhabha's theory, they necessarily *will* be falsified, since they are always built on a fundamental ambiguity.

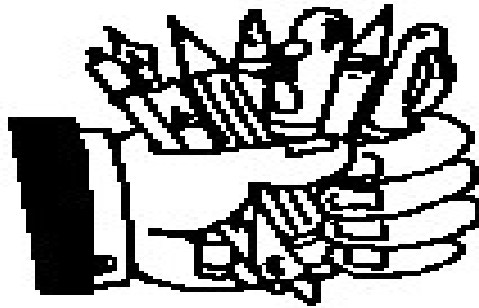
On the other hand, adopting a strategy like Bhabha's, with 'a differential quality that allows the concepts to play against each other... without any stable position or fixed co-ordinates', denies 'colonial discourse any chance' to counter-attack (2012:9). Because they are ambiguous, non-falsifiable and border on meaninglessness, Bhabha's concepts are immune to critique by pro-colonial authors. Bhabha is sufficiently evasive to place him outside the binaries he uses. His evasive location protects him from colonial critique. However, it also renders him difficult for allies to use. Compared to Bhabha, Saïd has had much greater resonance beyond academia. He provides a particular analysis which can be applied. And the likes of Bernard Lewis are quite capable of neutralising Bhabha by simply rejecting his work for its failure to play by the "rules of the game", or misconstruing its arguments. Whereas they must at least engage with Saïd, they can ignore texts which they can dismiss so easily. In the world of academic prose, poetic or aestheticised language is easily misread or dismissed as nonsense. It is thus quite easy to either recuperate or ignore. And it seems a self-destructive strategy. Is it really worth speaking meaninglessly, just to make sure opponents can't rebut one's claims? One's fortress cannot be breached, only because one has no fortress to begin with. In my view, opponents always deserve at least the opportunity to rebut, because no author can be certain that their own beliefs are beyond doubt.



Another of Bhabha's supporters, Gillian Rose (1995), argues that Bhabha's style is not part of a 'critically ineffectual obsession with textuality'. Instead, it performs a subject-position symptomatic of the contradictions of postcolonial discourse (1995:365). In other words, Bhabha manifests the argument he's making in his style, as well as the content of his work. He positions himself in a place (from which to speak) which shows the things he is trying to say. Rose argues that Bhabha's texts resist summary and comparison to others. This is because they are not systematised. The reader is entangled in knots of theoretical complexity before being led along 'threads of wonderful argument' to further knots (1995:365). She praises Bhabha's 'dazzling' display of theoretical 'fluency' (1995:368), and his simultaneous creation of discomfort with this fluency. She argues that his text resists 'the Western academic's desire for a transparent knowledge of self and the world by performing a different relation to knowledge' (1995:370). In simpler terms, Rose is saying that academics want to know and catalogue everything. Bhabha has written a text which can't be known or catalogued, and which says things without knowing and cataloguing. This shows that there are ways of writing which don't require that everything be known or catalogued, and which don't try to know or catalogue. This revelation undermines academic thought, and by implication, colonial power. Against any experience of a unitary ego or self, Bhabha's approach seeks to create a play of signifiers – but a play which is regulated or structured in a particular way. Critique, or theory, from this point of view is partly about disrupting or dissolving binary oppositions. It is about complicating any categories which seem too simple, and instead producing an uncanny effect.

Not all commentators agree that Bhabha's resistance to meaning is emancipatory. In a critique of this kind of position, Lawrence Phillips (1998) alleges that Bhabha creates 'an

unlocateable, abstract discursive space into which his own exploitative epistemological voyeurism can be displaced'. First, Bhabha adopts an abstract view of the 'colonial subject'. Then, he reduces this subject to an indeterminable in-between space which is inherently unknowable. Finally, he inserts his own perspective, his point of view or gaze, into this in-between category. The result is not an egalitarian, open space. Rather, it is a personal scratchpad for Bhabha's own beliefs. It is extremely structurally rigid. It also echoes the fascist aestheticisation of politics (an accusation also made by Chandra (2012)). Similarly, Hallward calls Bhabha's style 'repetitive' and 'infuriating' (2001:24). He also objects to Bhabha's continual use of, and complicity in, western academic discourse which on Bhabha's reading is part of colonial power. I would add that Bhabha does not simply use academic discourse. He locates himself at the most inaccessible heights of it. This reflects his underlying refusal to leave the dominant discourse - a refusal based on his conviction that leaving is ultimately impossible, because the structure of the dominant discourse is the structure of reality. Bhabha seeks to subvert from within, rather than oppose in a binary opposition. But in using his strategy to defend his strategy, he is open to accusations of question-begging and circularity.



I disagree with the argument for aestheticised language, for a number of reasons. Firstly, Bhabha *does* have a set of fixed positions which can be unpacked and criticised - and which have been. Critiques like those of Perloff, Parry, Harvey and Dirlik (see below, 890-907) have not been impeded by Bhabha's impenetrability. Secondly, pro-colonial scholars are more than capable of dismissing or ignoring Bhabha, precisely *because* he appears not to say anything meaningful. Indeed, the likes of the World Bank find it easier to ignore Bhabha than they do to ignore those (such as Saïd, Chomsky, or world-systems analysts) who work with historical, empirical situations and direct, literal concepts. Thirdly, meaninglessness and the impossibility of being wrong are too high a price to pay for silencing adversaries, even when the adversaries are oppressors. The unimpeachable yet groundless authority of the author, the impossibility of communication when someone is *not* always-already inside the author's binary, and the decisive loss of the ability to act in definite, determinate, decisive ways are just a few of the costs.

Reading Bhabha's interviews shows that he is quite capable of writing in plain English. He chooses not to, for aesthetic or strategic reasons. He takes the position that linguistic clarity is tied-up with adversarial authority. He seeks to both subvert and replace such authority (Rose, 1995:365). On the other hand, he resists the construction of alternative theoretical models, especially general ones (Huddart, 2006:17). Byrne describes Bhabha as 'eclectic and cosmopolitan', taking delight in the irreverant juxtaposition of diverse texts (2009:xi). However, Bhabha also argues that clear communication is important. It is important to be able to speak and write clearly so as to 'feel represented' (SPD, 365). Bhabha claims to take the issue of accessibility seriously. However, he claims that the more difficult parts of his work are those where he is 'trying to think hardest', or in a 'futuristic' way (TT, 31). Others are places where he deals with things which can't be translated, or articulated in language (TT, 32). This doesn't explain why so much of his writing is difficult. In an interview, Bhabha suggests that he turns to theory when a problem does not fit into existing frames. The role of theory is to break down 'scholarly

propriety' and boundaries among academic disciplines. It is to bring different approaches into conversation, or to hybridise them (DH, n.p.).

In another piece, he offers no fewer than three excuses. Firstly, he is dealing with philosophical issues. It is normal for others dealing with the same issues - such as Heidegger - to use difficult language. Secondly, despite its difficulty, 'there are actually people who want to read it and will find it really helpful'. Thirdly, he is dealing with 'difficult material', which is 'contradictory and ambiguous', and others have 'neglected or failed to deal with' for this reason (MGM, 172). Hence, Bhabha presents the issue in terms of an inherent difficulty which others 'evade' or 'bypass', but he confronts (MGM, 173). He conveniently displaces his own stylistic issues onto his material. Implicitly, Bhabha's rhetoric suggests that opponents are afraid of difficult issues, and that difficulty is closer to truth than simplicity. In practice, this may be less a truth-claim than an aesthetic choice.



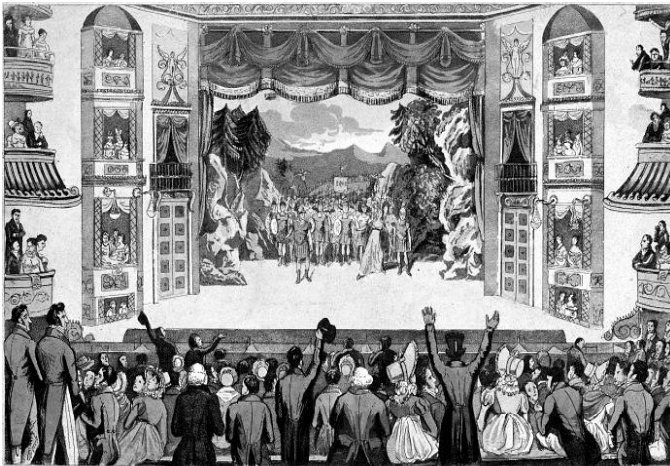
Like many things in Bhabha's work, the contradiction between aspirations to be understood and stylistic obscurity is unresolved. Bhabha never really provides answers to the questions he raises. The answer is repeatedly postponed (Han, 2005:7). This is not accidental. It is inherent to the idea of deferral as constitutive of signification – an idea tied-up closely with constitutive ambivalence. Once one sees past the difficult language, Bhabha's work takes on a repetitive tone. Bhabha analyses and reinterprets a lot of different texts. But his analysis always circles back to the same conclusions. His readings can be rather reductive, since they often have to stretch texts to fit into his categories.

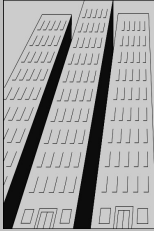
Bhabha is associated with the 'linguistic turn' in cultural studies (Parry, 2004:55). According to critics, he interprets colonialism on a 'language model' (2004:57), as an instance of or analogous to the function of textuality in Derrida and language in Lacan. He reduces knowledge-formation to the signifying process, which is conceived on a Derridean or Lacanian model (meaning that it is internally split, and never obvious or self-present). For critics, therefore, he neglects the empirical aspects of knowledge-formation (2004:59). If a reader does not accept the primacy of language in subjectivity, power, or colonialism, the rest of Bhabha's approach is likely to seem to miss the point – to challenge only perceptions, not real structures. It is very clear that Bhabha is fighting language and the subject, instead of capitalism or colonialism in a more worldly sense (though he seems to expect linguistic victories to produce worldly effects). Supporters of Bhabha see his approach as destroying colonial power directly, through its very performance. However, this claim doesn't work unless one is sure that colonial power is linguistic – a claim which Bhabha typically assumes rather than shows. It also doesn't work if one adopts a model of language other than the Derridean/Lacanian model. And it is ultimately dependent on the reader's acceptance of Bhabha's critique.

Bhabha doesn't dispel culturally powerful ideas unless people see him do it. And the difficult, poetic nature of Bhabha's writing prevents people from seeing him do it. Critics accuse authors like Bhabha of writing in a way which nobody outside a narrow intellectual group can understand. They accuse him of obscurity and even elitism (see Rose, 1995:366). In 1998, Bhabha was awarded a prize for 'bad writing' by the journal *Philosophy and Literature* (Byrne, 2009:1). As a result of such criticisms, Huddart suggests that Bhabha has attracted an unusual amount of negative commentary (2009:100). Postcolonial theory has a convenient explanation for this. Western egos resist the dissolution Bhabha performs, and reassert their authority by rejecting his work – a typical colonial gesture. But this is yet another instance of question-begging. Here, as elsewhere, postcolonial theory is all too glib and self-contained. In an almost theological manner, any possible objection is contained in advance. The author cannot be wrong.



Part of the motivation for this approach is political. Bhabha seeks to contest modernity by establishing other sites of speech (LC, 252). Hence, Bhabha implies that he is speaking from outside modernity (though he also contradicts this implied claim). The self-enclosure of his discourse is necessary for the purpose of being 'other'. It is necessary that it avoid accountability to 'modern reason' so as to show, in its performance, that it is 'other'. However, it is unclear why Bhabha believes this other site will have transformative effects. According to certain critics, modernity is a totalising system which recognises no outside. However, in practice, modern thought has always been quite comfortable labelling and dismissing various 'other' points of view – as primitive, traditional, despotic, and so on. Simply being 'other' changes nothing. Crucially, Bhabha believes he is performing an otherness which is also constitutive of modernity, not simply outside it. Yet, even if true, this adds little to the likely effectiveness of his strategy. One has to accept a lot of Lacanian/Derridean baggage for the assumption to make sense.





The concept of **western reason** (or **modern reason**) is commonly found in postcolonial, decolonial, and indigenous theory. It refers to a particular, historically constructed view of knowledge which emerged mainly in Europe, mainly in the modern period – and which, according to many of these theorists, is central to western identity and colonial power. “Western reason” often replaces capitalism or imperialism as the main antagonist for these theorists. In other words, they try to destroy or overthrow or subvert western reason instead of trying to overthrow capitalism or imperialism. In critical theory and history, ‘modern’ does not generally mean ‘contemporary’. The ‘modern period’ is usually dated from about 1600 or a bit before, to the present or the recent past. (The contemporary world may or may not still be considered ‘modern’. Some authors believe we are now in ‘late modernity’ or ‘hypermodernity’, others that we are in ‘postmodernity’). In Europe, the modern period involved a gradual revolution in social practices, institutions and ideas. It is distinguished from the Ancient and Medieval periods. It roughly corresponds to the emergence of the modern state and, later, capitalism (the first absolutist kings took power roundabout 1610; the industrial revolution began roundabout 1760). It also roughly corresponds to the period in which Europe colonised the rest of the world (Columbus “discovered” the Americas in 1492).

Modernity is a complex idea which carries different meanings in different texts. The modern period is characterised by a questioning or rejection of tradition as the basis for social values. It is associated with social changes such as urbanisation (more people living in cities), secularisation (less religious practice and more belief in science), industrialisation (mass production of goods in factories), the rise of modern bureaucracy and capitalism, the ‘disenchantment’ of the world, and particular traditions in philosophy, politics,

art and culture. In politics, ideas of individual rights and formal equality are often taken to be 'modern' ideas. For a long time, modernity was portrayed by most European radicals as an ongoing process of progress towards a better world. Modernity also changed people's relationship to time. The idea that time happens like a straight line, a progression of moments devoid of distinct content ('linear' or 'homogeneous empty' time), is a modern idea. Beliefs in historical progress, and (more indirectly) nationalism, are products of this way of thinking about time.



However, modernity has also led to bureaucracy, surveillance, modern warfare, ecological destruction and colonisation. There are critiques of modernity from both radical and conservative positions. **Rationalisation** – the rise of 'reason' as a substitute for tradition – is one of the aspects of modernity. It is connected to the rise of science, technology, capitalism and liberalism. Rationalisation means that older motivations for social actions – including emotion and tradition – are largely replaced by instrumental, rational motivations. Bureaucratic rules and economic incentives are examples of instrumental approaches.

Modernity originated in Europe, but was exported (often violently) all over the world – firstly by colonisers, and later also by imitators in other countries. Colonialism was at least partly motivated or legitimised as a way to bring peoples and territories into modernity. **Postcolonial** countries (also known as the global South – encompassing Asia, Africa, the Middle East, South and Central America, the Caribbean, and Oceania) often have complex and ambiguous relationships to modernity. Postcolonial and decolonial theorists often argue that postcolonial countries are actually part of modernity. They are a colonial underside which is exploited to enrich the west within a modern world-system.

However, they are often portrayed in dominant discourses as 'lacking' modernity, as being traditional or pre-modern. Many people in these countries seek to '**modernise**' – but this carries implications of cultural loss, and of becoming like the west. For this reason, there is often ambivalence about whether and how far to 'modernise'. In practice, 'modernisation' is often an excuse for dispossessing and suppressing poorer, less exploitable parts of the population. It justifies developmental bureaucracies which are largely unaccountable to the population. The modernity/tradition binary often has particular importance in postcolonial countries and defines different political positions in terms of their relative preference for western or “local” practices.

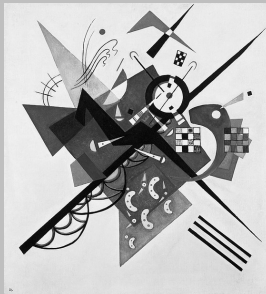
Anti-colonial movements in the 1920s-80s usually embraced modernity while also opposing western colonial power and seeking to preserve a non-western identity. Independent governments in the global South have similarly pursued 'modernisation' and 'development' towards modernity. Successive Chinese and Indian governments, for example, have pursued forms of modernisation which are meant to bring wealth and national success, while also trying to preserve a distinct identity. Countries seek to “modernise” so as to survive a changed world, compete with the west and avoid recolonisation, or to be part of a brighter, progressive future. This is the reason (for example) why the current Chinese government welcomes western investment and exploitative factory work. The government believes that the growth of capitalism will bring increased wealth, import technologies which will upgrade the Chinese economy, and contribute to national greatness and the ability to prevent any future imperialist invasions. The earlier, Maoist government also pursued modernisation based on Marxism – which is also a modern belief-system. However, Mao modified Marxism to 'Chinese conditions' – for instance, emphasising appeals to virtue over material incentives to motivate work, and stressing the importance of agriculture. This is typical of the kind of syncretism which characterises 'modernisation' in the global South.

For critical theorists such as Bhabha and Spivak, the philosophical aspects of modernity are particularly important for understanding colonialism. In philosophy, modernity is associated with the '*Enlightenment*'. This was a period of theoretical production which largely broke with mediaeval philosophy and its focus on religion, to produce new works focused on reason and humanity. Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, John Locke and René Descartes are sometimes treated as founders or representatives of modernity. For example, some critics associate modernity with the 'Cartesian cogito' or 'ego' – the idea of a thinking self which is separate from the body and the outer world, an idea pioneered by Descartes. The idea of 'reason' involved in this tradition is not simply the capacity to think or deduce. It involves an idea that human beings are first of all '*knowing subjects*', or beings which think. The knowing subject is a transcendental kind of being. It is distinct from all particular experiences, feelings and relationships. For Kant, it is a condition for any knowledge or experience or relationship. In some theories, such as Hegel's, 'reason' is a general force, bigger than individual humans, which unfolds and progresses through time. These kinds of modern philosophers see reason as the basis of true knowledge, and also as the basis of morality. However, it should be remembered that not all modern philosophers attached such overwhelming importance to the knowing subject. Some, such as Hume, maintained that no knowledge can come from reason alone. Knowledge always involves relationships with sense-objects in the outer world.

Postcolonial and poststructuralist critics of modern reason see modernity as bloating the ego, and concealing people's interdependence and reliance on external forces. They variously argue that the idea of the *modern subject* encourages practices of conquest, colonisation, control, self-inhibition, and destruction of nature. It promotes a false logic of domination. If European modernity is the same thing as 'reason', and 'reason' is the source of value, then by implication, Europeans are justified in conquering and re-educating

everyone else. If non-European people are insufficiently modern to make efficient use of land, this might justify attempts to take it from them. At its limits, modern philosophy defines humanity mainly in terms of reason. But since 'reason' is identical with western modernity, this might mean that non-western peoples aren't even human. For instance, there is a passage in Kant's work where he refers to indigenous peoples as not truly human (Kant, 1914). It is easy to see how this could be used to justify the actual history of colonisation, slavery and genocide. Marxists and Realists would claim that it is a retrospective justification for economic or geopolitical ambitions. However, postcolonial theorists tend to take it at face-value as the cause of colonisation. Westerners dispossessed indigenous peoples because they believed in the superiority of western reason.

It is also worth remembering that most radicals have historically been passionate supporters of modernity and modernisation. In particular, nearly all Marxists are modernists. Marx believed that the rise of capitalism and modern technology is progressive, because it creates the conditions for socialism. Liberals are almost by definition modernists. Social democrats believe in gradual progress. Also, most anti-colonial movements and thinkers in the twentieth century were modernist. So when someone like Bhabha criticises modernity, they are criticising the heritage of their own movement. However, there have always been radical critics of modernity, such as Romantics and, later, Weberians. After the Holocaust and the advent of nuclear war, optimistic views of modernity became less common. Many radicals of the 1960s-70s were critical of major aspects of modern life, particularly commodification, disenchantment, bureaucracy, ecological destruction, and the repression of desire. In the arts, "modernism" has a distinct meaning as a type of art which engages with (and does not necessarily endorse) the modern world.



(Left) *On White II* by Vassily Kandinsky (1923), a modernist artwork.

An artist is 'modernist' if they reject or drastically alter established ways of doing art in their area. For example, a modern artist might paint abstract rather than representational images.

A modern novelist might write stream-of-consciousness narratives or narratives which lack internal coherence, instead of the more usual type of novel which simulates an objective reality. Most modernists have historically been politically progressive.

Postcolonial theory, like poststructuralism, is generally critical of modernity. Yet it remains part of a broadly progressive political sphere. Being critical of modernity does not necessarily mean wanting to 'go back' to a real or imagined 'premodern' situation, or to revalue tradition and authority (although it can mean this). In the global South, there are traditions which oppose modernity because they identify with a real or imagined 'tradition'. For example, interpretations of Islam are divided between 'modernists', who endorse science and social reform, and 'conservatives' and 'radicals', who resist change. In Africa, 'tradition' often refers to precolonial institutions (such as chiefdoms and indigenous courts) which were maintained and adapted by colonisers. 'Tradition' can also refer to agrarian and mercantile sectors of the economy, in contrast with smaller 'modern' sectors. In cases like the Rushdie Affair (see below, 475-81), Bhabha is clearly aligned with the modernists against the conservatives. Generally, postcolonial theorists do not seek to revalue tradition or reclaim a pure past. They also do not seek to pass 'through' modernity to something 'higher', in the way that Marxists do with capitalism. Instead, they seek to subvert and possibly to move beyond modernity from inside it.

The theories advanced by Bhabha and Spivak have been radicalised somewhat in more recent, '*decolonial*' theory. According to this theory, modernity has an underside: colonialism or 'coloniality' (Mignolo, 2000; Quijano, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2004). Western countries are economically rich, only because they can plunder other regions or give them the poor-quality work which needs to be done, while taking an unfair share of the profits. Westerners can imagine their own social forms to be natural and superior, only because they are able to demean and subordinate other forms of social life. Westerners can imagine themselves to be good people, only because they can treat others as victims or villains. Originally, this critique was mainly economic and political. But as we shall see, the Derridean idea of co-constitutivity gives new meanings to the idea of an underside.

The very existence of the west and its forms of 'subjectivity' and 'identity' is taken to be an effect of a structurally necessary subordination of others. It is necessary, not because there is too little to go around, but because identity itself is premised on exclusion. The South is not poor because modernity is incomplete or has failed. It is not poor because the North takes an unfair share or because capitalism is an unequal system. The South is poor as an effect of modernity. Modernity requires that the South be poor and 'colonial', so the North can be rich and 'modern'. Modernity can only be seen effectively from its colonial underside. Modernity is a system of domination by what Sylvia Wynter (1998) calls a western bourgeois ethnoclass. Some authors try to relativise or 'provincialise' modernity. They argue that it is a particular world-view, promoted by Europeans, reflecting European interests or culture. This European worldview has been imposed elsewhere. It is not relevant to the rest of humanity. This is why 'modern reason' is also termed 'western reason'. This is similar to, but different from, the argument in dependency theory and world systems analysis that the North enriches itself economically, by exploiting the South. Dependency theorists generally see modernisation as desirable. They see the existing international division of labour as a barrier to modernisation in

poor countries. Postcolonial and decolonial theorists see modernity as requiring poverty. However, they also don't generally endorse "post-development theory" which argues that modernisation and development are undesirable. Their challenge to modernity is "epistemic" (based on the regime of knowledge), not socio-economic.

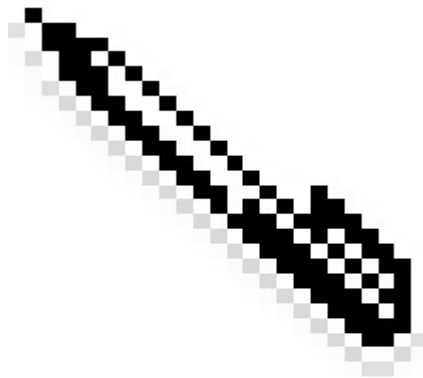
Aspects of modernity which are rejected or criticised vary somewhat between different postcolonial authors – although they all claim to be criticising 'modernity' and 'western reason'. Objectable 'modern' ideas from a postcolonial point of view sometimes include the idea of a separate self, the desire to control and dominate nature, antagonistic binary thinking, the focus on fixed things rather than relations or flows, the elevation of 'western reason' as a global value, the use of technological root-metaphors, commodification, scientific 'objectivity', ideas of 'transparency' and 'self-determination', and a focus on exclusion and competition. Sometimes, responsibility and respect are preferred to rights and justice as values. Sometimes, the denial of cosmic and bodily levels of 'knowing' is central to the critique of 'reason'. However it's conceived, modernity is taken to be continuous with colonial, capitalist, and state power. For example, indigenous writer Taiaiake Alfred argues that '[t]he beliefs and assumptions that shape our present realities are "true" only to the extent that they consciously shape our thoughts and actions to fit the framework desired by the state. They are the myths of the colonial mindset' (Alfred, 2009:107). Modern education is also criticised for blinkering people by only showing them the modern world-view, and not other world-views. If someone 'thinks' from inside modernity, they are drastically limited in what, and how, they can think.

In a way, the postcolonial position is more radical than older Marxist and anti-colonial positions. It criticises the current world order on a deeper level than dependency theory or Marxism. It does not simply seek alternative

ways to modernise. In other ways, however, it is more limiting. The assumption that everyone today is thinking from inside modernity, and therefore decisively limited in what they can think, makes it difficult to propose alternatives. Marxists, dependency theorists, anarchists, and deep ecologists take a variety of positions on modernity, but they all offer definite political alternatives to the way the world is organised today. Postcolonial and (to a lesser extent) decolonial theorists tend not to provide any such alternatives – because any alternative which can be understood might be captured and turned into another variety of modernity, because the subject who acts to build an alternative is also part of modernity, and because they believe in subversion of meanings rather than binary oppositions (see below, 212-19).

Different postcolonial, decolonial, and indigenous scholars take different positions on how far it is possible or desirable to escape from modernity. Some, like Alfred (2009), counterpose an alternative, indigenous logic to the logic of modernity. Some, like Glissant ([1990] 1997:190), propose relational thinking as an alternative to modernity. Some suggest 'wisdom traditions' such as Buddhism as ways of overcoming the modern ego (e.g. Choi and Black, 2008). Others suggest that the deconstruction of western reason must precede any possibility of forming another logic. This seems to be the position Bhabha takes. If people (even colonised people!) are constructed by and caught within the logic of modernity, any alternative they think of will also be part of this logic. The type of 'ego' involved in any attempt to think about or fight for or build an alternative is still part of modernity, and it will reproduce modernity. The point, therefore, is to disrupt, subvert and problematise the logic of modernity in the hope that this will open up the space for something else to come into being. However, certain of the assumptions of postcolonial theory render it difficult for anyone ever to pass to the moment of actually realising anything else – because the theory perversely reproduces the centrality of 'western reason' and undermines the ego which would be the basis for an alternative.

From a Lacanian point of view, Easthope raises the objection that Derridean difference renders *everything* unstable. Bhabha's theory of hybridity rests on Derrida's theory of difference. This theory states that any stable meaning depends on an unstable in-between space which can shatter it. Bhabha uses this idea to suggest that colonial spaces are unstable. However, it also leaves Bhabha's own texts unstable (1998b:343). Bhabha hides from this implication through stylistic complexity. However, if the claim is true, then stylistic complexity is no guarantee against instability (1998b:344). Easthope also suggests that Bhabha 'effectively treats hybridity as a transcendental signified'. In other words, Bhabha treats hybridity as the privileged term in a binary opposition (with identity or presence). He thus remains within binary thought. Easthope also argues that the universalism of the Derridean model makes literary criticism too easy. On a Derridean model, every text is hybrid. Differences among texts are effaced. The critic is spared the task, for instance, of distinguishing between texts which do and don't seek to create a fixed identity (1998b:345). He also suggests that Bhabha is engaged in a project of mastery. Bhabha poses as the 'subject supposed to know' in a world of confusing hybridity (1998b:347). The ease of this style of writing, once the correct terms are memorised, is shown by the ease with which it is parodied. For example, an anonymous student has created a parody essay which presents the Internet shock video *2 Girls 1 Cup* as a beacon of poststructuralist transgression, using an appropriate theoretical vocabulary (Anon., n.d.). The style, once mastered, can be used to endorse or denigrate just about anything.



From my own point of view, I'll admit that I find Bhabha's prose frustrating. Unlike some readers in the activist and popular spheres, I have no objection to complicated language, as long as it is saying something which is actually difficult to convey. I'm not a fan of 'dumbing down'. Something important is lost if one talks about Marx without alienation or the labour theory of value. The dumbed-down Marx is both less profound and closer to capitalist 'common sense' than the theoretically complicated version. And some people might simply be unable to write 'clearly', because their worldview is so distant from other people's, and can be communicated only with difficulty. But I dislike the use of stylistic complication as a 'strategy' to frustrate the production of meaning. I feel that this has become a habit in cultural studies, and it makes reading contemporary theory much harder work than it needs to be. By making theory 'hard work', it shuts theory off from most of the population. It entrenches academics as a theoretical elite. This is the opposite of the project promoted by Gramsci, Freire, Vaneigem, and diverse others – to bring theory *to* the 'masses', or else to encourage people to think for themselves, to think and see otherwise. Without such effects, theory remains functionally conservative. Like many theorists, Bhabha posits an 'otherness' which never becomes 'other' than himself, and never escapes the confines of university life. It silences the subaltern just as surely as reductive positivist discourse.

Bhabha often seems to use an unnecessarily complicated language. For example, much of his work focuses on the idea of inbetweenness or border-spaces. But instead of sticking to one word to name this space, Bhabha multiplies different terms: hybridity, liminality, extimacy, cultural difference, mimicry, and so on. He drops in concepts from a dozen major theorists which will be comprehensible only to those who have studied the author he's drawn on, but he rarely either defines them or traces them to their source. Sometimes it is questionable whether Bhabha endorses the ontology behind the concept. However, in this introduction, I will try to extract the pearls of wisdom as well as the contentious assumptions from what seems to me to be a morass of purple prose.

Bhabha and the Reader: The War against Meaning

Like modernist authors such as Beckett, Bhabha undermines the form of writing in which he engages. If there is an implied dialogue or contract between reader and writer, Bhabha systematically breaks it, frustrating and disempowering the reader. This reflects a view of writer and reader, not as cooperating to produce meaning, but as engaged in an antagonistic conflict. Rose argues that Bhabha's writing is 'invulnerable to the reader's usual strategies' (1995:367). Bhabha uses various tricks to disempower and defeat the reader. To speak of 'strategies' in this context is to go along with Bhabha's conflictual, strategic view of language. Yet this, like many of Bhabha's views, "begs the question". It assumes an answer to the very questions it poses, which predetermines how the questions are framed. Many of us don't see ourselves as engaged in game-like or war-like manoeuvres when reading or interpreting. Indeed, this framework seems very cynical, and destructive of the very possibility of communication as anything other than a battle. (The exchanges between Hamm and Clov in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* [2009/1953] give a good sense of where such a model of conversation leads).



This view of conversation makes sense in terms of a particular reconstruction of an Althusserian model of the unconscious, in which positionalities create interests which unconsciously determine people's actions. (Bhabha never explicitly endorses such a model, although fellow postcolonial intellectual Gayatri Spivak does). The subaltern subject engaged in such a battle is conveniently freed from any obligations arising from intellectual standards of argument, the reader's ability to comprehend, or any kind of dialogue with the author's 'other'. However, authors such as Bhabha do not recognise any such blockage on their own side. Their refusal of dialogue is displaced onto the (western, European, white...) other who is assumed to already have refused dialogue.

Rather than saying that Bhabha resists strategies of power, it makes more sense to say that Bhabha's works are resistant to comprehension and critique. This allows them to exist within a closed ideological world, similar to that of a cult or a Stalinist sect. They are non-falsifiable, because they resist being pinned down to concrete claims which can be falsified. Any attempts to understand, object to, qualify or modify the theory are pre-empted – potentially giving the author a lot of power, if the reader plays along. Because Bhabha's texts are resistant to comprehension and critique, they are valued by people who share his ontology. Their impenetrability displays the impenetrability of language as such, and disrupts the false clarity of colonial power.



Readers might also, however, feel that Bhabha unfairly assumes or establishes the truth of his premises and conclusions in this resistance to comprehension. His works may be felt to resist dialogue and negotiation, and to resist rebuttal in a way which establishes their truth (or truth-effect) by fiat. Hence, Hallward sees Bhabha's theory as 'fundamentally singular or self-constituent' (2001:xvi). In other words, Bhabha writes as if his own theory captures a singular, unified reality. This basic reality is the field of ambivalence. This field does not relate to anything outside itself. Bhabha seems to wish to avoid 'answerability', or the possibility of a reply by a reader. He thus claims a much more total, unconditional authority than the discourses he criticises. He might deny that his argument implies such

authority, since it is intended to be juxtaposed with other, incommensurable positions. However, he is clearly intending some kind of effect on the reader; one is not meant to simply read his work and ignore it. He is positing claims (particularly the rejection of western reason and the Derridean grammar of interpretation) which are taken to be binding on everyone – and which he attempts to impose in a highly authoritarian (and underhand) manner. In practice this type of claim manifests politically as a demand for recognition and validation of one's own discourse, and an aggressive silencing of positions which violate the basic grammar.

Bhabha makes his argument through his style as much as through what he says. But there is a danger in the colonisation of style as well as substance by a particular theory, and this danger is that it destroys any possible space for dialogue with other positions. When someone performs their ontology in the way Bhabha does, there is a danger of their position dominating the entire discursive space. The writer assumes he is right to such a degree that discussion is only possible on the assumption that he is. The possibility that he might be wrong is foreclosed. It is not only denied, but unspeakable in terms of the author's discourse. This paradoxically reinstalls the very things postcolonial theory seeks to subvert – ego, certainty, domination, closed discourse. It does the opposite of what it seeks to do, and frustrates the pursuit of openness in discourse by pre-empting the language of openness to defend its own closure.

Bhabha's supporters would probably reply that the same problem affects direct, denotative communication. The very form of such discourse implies a particular worldview (say, empiricism). Yet denotative communication is not closed to different positions in the manner that Bhabha's work is. There are always many possible positions and they are able to speak to each other about what seem to be common questions. It is even possible to posit the inadequacy of denotative communication in denotative terms. On the other hand, it is hard to see how Bhabha's approach could possibly be posited as inadequate in its own terms. Its own terms are too vague to provide “rules of the game” accessible to

anyone else. In disempowering 'western egos' seeking to rebut, capture or rationalise his views, Bhabha disempowers every potential reader as well – and thus hyper-empowers his own position, in an authoritarian manner.

Suppose, for instance, that I argue that Bhabha's view of the migrant standpoint as disruptive of dominant reason is thrown into doubt by the fact that many actual migrants believe passionately in western modernity and integration. Bhabha and his supporters would be unlikely to either accept or rebut the point. Instead, they would question the structure of the counter-argument. Why do I privilege the supposed opinions of migrants over the critic's interpretation of artworks as a source of truth? Doesn't this entail a naïve empiricism, or a belief that migrants' opinions are 'self-present' to them? Aren't I centring myself as a 'knowing subject' by making this claim? How can I claim to know what migrants' opinions are, when I must be relying on some kind of 'native informant' whose statements are always-already inflected with a colonial power-relation? And they'd have a point. Knowledge uses categories, which break down the continuum of life into discrete components. It relies on evidence, which is seen from a certain point of view, and categories, which are socially constructed.

But the objection also misses the point. Bhabha's aesthetic competency does not free him from similar epistemological problems. He still relies on the evidence of his eyes and ears as to what is present in an artwork or text. Indeed, the objection, taken far enough, precludes one from saying anything at all. Having established that knowledge is socially constructed, power-laden, and fallible, one is faced with a choice to stop making knowledge-claims or to keep making them while recognising these attributes. The fact that Bhabha keeps saying something – however qualified and self-disrupting his statements are – renders the deployment of such anti-knowledge arguments against others a performative contradiction. Like it or not, he continues to make knowledge-claims. But he privileges aesthetic performance, or constant complication and disruption of language, over other ways of selecting which claims to make.



In addition, it is not clear that Bhabha is really addressing the real reader at all. Bhabha's text is written in a constant dialogue with a pre-chosen 'other', the western intellectual. This 'other' is part of the author's inner psychological fantasy-space (known in psychoanalysis as an introjection). It is not the western 'other' itself, but an inner representation of it. In a sense, it is already known. The author is thus enacting 'strategies' in a sphere assumed to be total (the colonial text encompassing both self and other), against an other who is already known. He is talking to his own shadow. As a result, the text is extremely resistant to the insertion of any kind of otherness it does not already contain - or to any recognition that its inner fantasy-space is *incomplete* (in the literal sense that *things and beings exist which it has not encountered*, rather than the smothering sense of an intimate relationship to a known, excluded other). It resists any dialogue with any subject which is *really other* to it - in other words, which is not part of its pre-existing fantasy-frame. It avoids encountering a 'thou' in Buber's (2004/1923) terms, or a Real in Lacan's terms. Anything 'other' is reduced to the dominant terms. For example, Bhabha rapidly incorporates new critics and opponents in pre-existing boxes, without engaging with the details of their positions.

Yet Bhabha is read by many people who do not conform to the ideal-type of the 'western intellectual' – many of them non-western scholars and students. And even when the reader *is* from the designated opposition, Bhabha is often mistaken in assuming that they are entirely visible to him. They are taken to be mere ciphers of his general categories – every white western author simply reproduces colonial subjectivity, and any deviation from such reproduction reflects the subject-position's internal splits, rather than an author's uniqueness and idiosyncrasies, their diverse experiences and feelings, or their other, multiple subject-positions. The thirst for knowledge, engaging with the details, is superfluous when the theorist 'knows it all' already (even when what he knows is split, internally incomplete and so on – even if all he knows is that he does not truly 'know').



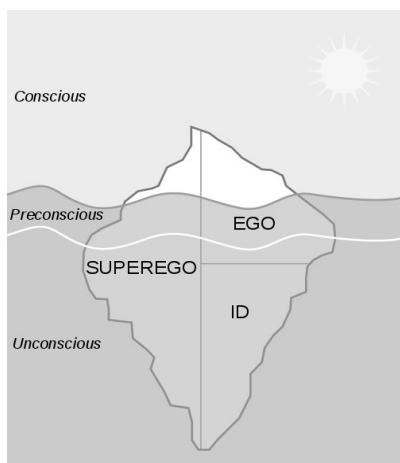
There is, as a result, something smothering and closed-minded about the way the world is folded in on itself in this kind of theorising. There is nothing new under the sun, only the same timeless process repeating itself over and over. Crucially, this serves to immunise people against the possibility of a future radically different from the present. This has political effects. For example, suffering arising from neoliberalism or neocolonialism is more bearable if it is conceived as a variant of timeless human suffering than if it is conceived as a temporary, contingent political effect. Paradoxically, authors like Bhabha claim to perform an opening onto exactly such a future radically different from the present. Showing that another way of writing is possible is itself part of this claim. However, as we shall see, Bhabha's approach entails remaining constantly within the present 'world', and never passing through the liminal zone where it becomes questionable to the actual creation of a different 'world'. His approach is thus ultimately system-conserving.

In addition, such closure renders Bhabha's work difficult to use for practical purposes. Dialogical texts are necessarily translational. They involve communication between distinct subject-positions or perspectives. Bhabha's texts resist translation, because their meaning is so vague to begin with. This makes it difficult for them to be reappropriated and re-used by activists and 'subaltern' actors - not only because they are hard to understand, but because their terms are difficult to communicate. They resist the 'looting of the ideological supermarket' (Law, n.d.) which is characteristic of radical appropriations of texts. They can't be easily translated into a different theoretical language, or their own terms explained to beginners in readily available terms (which doesn't stop me from trying). In many ways, Bhabha retains authorial mastery over his texts, even while performing the death of the author. He leaves the reader with little freedom in using the text, even while undermining the text's own authority.

Another difficulty with *performing* a text in this way is that it implies substitutionism. In writing in a way which reflects his own view of subalternity, Bhabha implicitly poses as a representative of all subalterns in the particular field of theory. This is especially problematic in that there is no empirical or political basis for such a stance, aside from the logic of the theory itself. Bhabha is an educated elite migrant, but he is implicitly allowed to stand-in for the whole of the global poor within academic critical theory. Postcolonial theorists typically speak 'as' rather than 'for' their category, but the political effect is similar: the exceptional elite theorist speaks as the visible representative of the group. Bhabha is 'playing' the game of representation inside the dominant system, in order to get represented 'as' the subaltern. But this is not necessarily a means of empowering the entire category.

When a theorist makes knowledge-claims about marginalised people in an aestheticised language, and grounds the validity of these claims in aesthetic competency rather than relationality or 'truth', the effect is to silence and make invisible the marginalised people

about whom the claims are made. The theorist enters into a vanguard role. In other words, the theorist decides what marginalised people 'really' think, mean, say, or do. This is the case, even when the theorist rejects 'representation' and opposes speaking for others. In practice, performatively, Bhabha continues to speak for others by classifying their statements or artworks in his own terms, ignoring what these statements and works mean for the speaker and for other actors. At best, Bhabha makes structural claims about how a statement affects a broader linguistic field. These statements involve a kind of structural science, in which structure can be deduced from observed relations. While useful enough as social science, this approach remains within the field of outer, top-down knowledge which poststructuralist and postcolonial theorists claim to have escaped (or at least to question).



Freud's model of the unconscious, as portrayed by Jordan Gordanier.

By implication, speaking unclearly is taken to mean speaking for the unconscious, contingency, or the unspeakable. In contrast, I would argue that slippage in language and in the unconscious cannot be treated as equivalent. The unconscious is a limit to language, whereas slippage within language is internal to it. It is true that the unconscious can cause linguistic (Freudian) slips, but there is a world of difference between such slips and the deliberate slippage Bhabha performs. The

unconscious makes itself felt in passionate, expressive ways which have an extra-linguistic meaning. In contrast, ambivalent language slips further from the unconscious at the same time as it slips further from conscious, meaningful discourse. It expresses nothing but the experience of ambivalence itself. Ultimately, the replacement of unconscious slippage by deliberate linguistic slippage increases the control of the 'ego' (and/or superego) over the 'unconscious' (particularly the id).

In this introduction and critique, I take a more prosaic, denotative approach. From my point of view, the role of theory is to create different kinds of understanding. Theory is about finding ways to make partial sense of the world by inventing concepts which rearrange the evidence in new ways. The point of rearranging the evidence is ultimately political. It is to find new ways to exercise power, to resist, disrupt or overthrow the dominant system of oppressive social relations, or to escape from its power and live in other, non-oppressive ways. Bhabha's work is sometimes useful for this project, but the process of wading through his aesthetic performance to reach the useful aspects feels to me like hunting for diamonds in mud. I would have much preferred if the theoretical diamonds were simply stated directly, where they can be picked up and re-used by readers without a high level of aesthetic competence or effort. I would also prefer if these beliefs were more clearly connected to evidence about anti-colonial resistance, migration, and so on, beyond the field of 'high' art, and if they were made in a way which allowed a less slippery style of dialogue and debate with opponents.

Bhabha's discourse is constructed in a way which frustrates the search for meaning and which creates closure. Yet, despite these structures of discursive closure, I believe that Bhabha's works *do* contain substantive empirical claims and assumptions which Bhabha holds to all or most of the time. I believe that, without clear, literal language, debate between or communication across different positions becomes impossible. And for all his ambiguity, Bhabha *does* make direct, literal claims – some of them rhetorically veiled, some of them extremely blunt (especially when he's denouncing positions he dislikes).



I expect, however, that Bhabha's supporters would determine that I have misunderstood him in reconstructing each of his claims. This is, of course, possible. Most often, I make as much sense as I can of Bhabha, in prosaic terms. Authors such as Bhabha may believe they are pointing to something 'unsayable', when in fact they are communicating something quite prosaically basic. However, it's difficult to know whether I'm missing something in the reading when I draw this conclusion. It is always *possible* that I've misunderstood Bhabha's argument, not only because of the inherent possibility of misunderstanding in any reading, but also because Bhabha provides arguments which are suggestive, ambiguous, and incomplete. In fact there are many people who use Bhabha's language with only a vague sense of what it means. This often leads to simplified uses which do not reflect the complexity of Bhabha's own theory. Some readers take the soundbites and little more: hybridity, messiness, ambiguity are good; all migrants or mixed-race people are hybrid; cultural difference is the same thing as multiculturalism. Bhabha claims no such things, but the vague, "commodified" way in which he uses concepts encourages such misreadings.

This said, I believe the discursive structure of Bhabha's work allows supporters to make such claims whatever an analyst happens to say – the 'obscurantist terrorism' denounced by Foucault. The intent of Bhabha's work is to destroy meaning. A reader who refuses to give up meaning and pins Bhabha down to a certain position is deemed to miss this central point. The point can be understood to an adherent's satisfaction only if the reader endorses Bhabha's position. The power to claim that a critic has not understood is built into the structure of a theory which glorifies ambivalence and expresses its content in its form. In rejecting the conclusions at the level of content, one is also rejecting the form – and hence, 'misunderstanding'. Against this backdoor imposition of a doctrine, I insist on the possibility of recognising as an observable statement that Bhabha holds such a belief, while also rejecting this belief myself. To do this, I need to bring Bhabha's claims back into the realm of literal, contestable statements.



To summarise, I am here presenting Bhabha as directly and literally as I can, stripping away the rhetorical flourish and presenting the underlying theoretical assumptions, as well as my agreements and disagreements with them. Given the complexity and obscurity of the root text, it is possible (even likely) that I've made mistakes in understanding the concepts. It is also likely that fans of aestheticised rhetoric will regard any attempt to render Bhabha in simpler language as itself a fundamental misunderstanding. It thus becomes extremely difficult to tell a real misunderstanding from a perfectly valid translation into more direct language which happens to irritate fans of Bhabha's style. I don't share the common view that aestheticised writing itself disrupts the 'modern subject', and therefore the dominant social system, because I consider the social system as mainly as an outer, coercive set of relations which one secedes from and renders external to the extent that one thinks or lives outside its categories. I don't believe that one makes oneself complicit in the system simply by using language, by thinking, or by preferring literal to ambiguous statements. I engage in more detail with Bhabha's claims to the contrary, and the basis of these claims, in the main text. I'm particularly interested in what Bhabha has to say about the construction of power, and ways to resist it.



Despite all the problems with his style, there is clearly appeal in Bhabha's work for some readers. The appeal is at least partly due to the display of mastery, and the theoretical 'high' or euphoria it gives to people who appreciate the art of writing. It is also partly the challenge it poses to readers, the thrill of solving (or not quite solving) the puzzle of unmasking of the text's meaning and displaying one's own competency by understanding the text. For me, such concerns have little hold. I am trained to understand the art in question, but I have little interest in the performance of mastery in itself. My concern is far more with what a theory can do – especially when put to work politically. This is why most of this text focuses on Bhabha's claims, rather than his style.

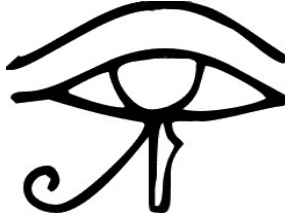
Aestheticisation of Language

Before preceding to the main discussion, something more can be said about style. As we have seen (above, 38), Bhabha is criticised for an aestheticisation of politics. However, his supporters largely endorse such a process. Chakrabarti celebrates the kind of aestheticised language used by Bhabha. Reading Bhabha is also 'interesting' because it is an 'intellectual challenge'. His strategies are concealed behind multiple masks and ciphers (2012:13). Chakrabarti's argument is based on valuing Bhabha's rhetorical competency (assumed to equate to theoretical sophistication), rather than the substance of his ideas. By this display of proficiency, Bhabha seeks a 'dynamic of equality' between North and South (2012:12). Chakrabarti thus values Bhabha's skilful display of technique, the status this gains for the group he represents, and the euphoric experience of a critic faced with an unusually challenging text. His assessment is more like an appreciation of an artwork, a sports performance, a chess game, a dance performance, or a mystery novel than an assessment of a theorist making determinate claims. Much as one assesses a contestant on Pop Idol by their vocal acrobatics (and not the accuracy or political impact of their lyrics), or an advert by its lyrical appeal (and not the usefulness of the product), many of Bhabha's fans assess him above all for his rhetorical skill, his virtuosity.

But should one assess theorists the way one might assess artistic or sporting performances? Does it give us better, more useful, or truer theories to do so? Does it help the oppressed? To take a parallel situation, someone can be a brilliant military general, and use this skill to fight for *or* against colonialism. Someone can be a brilliant novelist or poet, and use this skill to promote a wide range of different worldviews, including those for *or* against colonialism. I disagree with Bhabha on matters of substance. Does his technical skill provide any reason to prefer his substantive views to mine? I don't think so. In valuing the performance of theoretical language as such (rather than as a means to something), Bhabha and his fans come very close to the idea of 'art for art's sake' - a position requiring the very ontology of authenticity which Bhabha rejects (and which is usually associated with a rejection of social or political relevance). Yet it is not by any means limited to Bhabha. English-speaking poststructuralists seem to take this way of writing as both 'theoretically correct' so to speak (expressing a suitably pessimistic position about the possibility of meaning) and aesthetically pleasing. There is also a tendency to leave unnecessary gaps in texts, so that it is difficult to understand the text unless one agrees with it, and thus can fill in the gaps intuitively. A style like Bhabha's, which leaves a lot unsaid or ambiguous, is only comprehensible to those who already understand a lot of what he means. In general, if the purpose of theory is anything other than a display of competence, aestheticisation creates an inadequate product. For example, aestheticised theory is not particularly effective for understanding social phenomena, engaging in a productive dialogue, or acting in the world.

I would argue that this way of writing contributes to an aestheticisation of language - an ability to dance with words. It correspondingly pares back the use of language as a tool, as a reframing or way of thinking, as a connection between people, or as a way of solving problems. It thus contributes to the emptying of meaning in postmodernity, a condition already fuelled by the rise of advertising and PR, the prevalence of fictitious capital, the

rise of 'post-politics', and the increasing vagueness (and commodified deployment) of academic terminology. It is part of a process of simulation as analysed by Baudrillard (1994) - a process in which the system simply reproduces itself, without reference to anything outside it. This process, as Baudrillard argues, is disruptive of meaning and passion. It leads to an implosion of meaning in which everything becomes meaningless. In contrast, I see language as an artisanal tool for use in craft.



There is a danger of authoritarianism in Bhabha's approach. In order to value the aestheticisation of language, one has to maintain that thought is something difficult. "Ordinary" forms of thought must be assumed to be suspect – reproducing categories of a system too deeply buried even to be seen. (The basis for this view is the idea that people's subjectivities – who we are, how we think, what we value and desire – are simply effects of the social structure; more on this later, 83-98, 109-39). This entails burying the power of modernity at the deepest possible level in one's theory. Modernity is behind, or under, everything. Any surface-level opposition is necessarily complicit, because it does not reach this fundamental level. This is convenient in that it creates a vital role for the expert theorist who can engage in difficult thought and uncover the fundamental level. Such a theorist is taken to be doing more important work than people who are concretely fighting (for example) fascists or the state. Anything which is not compatible with the vanguard role of the theorist is seen as necessarily just an effect of modernity. Bhabha may seem to disrupt privilege. But in fact, the valuing of aesthetic competence reproduces the privilege of elite, qualified social actors. It liberates marginalised actors only to the extent that figures such as Bhabha are taken to be their representatives or stand-ins in the elite space.

The idea that 'western reason' is the main source of oppression leads to two problematic displacements. The first is the replacement of struggle against the system – as an outer adversary – with transgression and disruption of the self, or of particular discourses. This dovetails with neoliberal processes of displacing structural problems into the field of therapy and self-help. The second is a refusal to communicate in a way which has a clear meaning, or is open to rebuttal. This communicative style actually makes it extremely hard to engage with difference. If someone disagrees with one's own position, and one adopts a style like Bhabha's, one typically aestheticises or psychologises the adversary, reduces their opposition to one's own categories, disrupts and deconstructs the terms of their argument, and effectively strips them of discursive power. This disempowerment occurs, not by rebutting the argument, but through a skilful display of aesthetic competence which makes the other's position change form or disappear, or which takes away the very position they occupy, often by occupying it oneself instead. The silencing, cynical, and dishonest implications of this communicative style are concealed, because of the appearance that they are only used as a form of bottom-up resistance against colonial power. In practice, however, they are used against any critic or opponent, because deviation from the theorist's position is easily reframed (using their aesthetic competence) as an instance of colonial or modern discourse. As we will see, Bhabha uses the same techniques against anti-colonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Noel Ignatiev that he uses against colonisers.

The effect of aestheticised language can be debilitating. It does not only make Bhabha's works (and those of similar scholars) frustrating to read – particularly in their most common roles (e.g. as assigned readings in university courses, or necessary reference-points for scholars). It also makes it difficult to extract the intended meaning, to detect when others have misread or misused them, and to argue with an author's position. Some poststructuralist scholars seem to have only the vaguest idea what the concepts they're

using mean, though I wouldn't include Bhabha in this category. I've also had experiences with poststructuralists and postcolonial theorists who seem unable to recognise that they might be wrong about anything. They hide behind the complexity of their language (and sometimes, accusations of latent racism or imperialism) to avoid engagement with criticisms. I believe there is a relationship between this subjective disposition and the aestheticisation of language.



Also, the focus on disrupting authority and representation in a broad, cultural sense often undermines the struggle against authority and representation in a narrow, political sense. In a critique of another postcolonial theorist, Valentin Mudimbe, Neil Lazarus shows how Mudimbe conflates all forms of power/knowledge with the violence of colonialism. He is unable to recognise that a form of knowledge could entail power, without also entailing violence and domination (Lazarus, 2005). This critique is highly relevant to Bhabha.

Since Bhabha raises the objection that binarised anti-colonial politics can lead to violent dictatorships, it might be worth asking where his own rhetoric would lead, if installed in power. The absolute mastery exercised by an author who cannot be wrong, who avoids

saying anything rebuttable, and who sidesteps critical challenges, looks remarkably like the imperial 'post-politics' of the Third Way. Worse, it portends a style of politics based on an ever-shifting terrain of emotionally loaded signifiers, the ambiguity of which is used to render power unpredictable and arbitrary.



It is by no means clear that Bhabha's style of self-enclosed language undermines authority, as Rose (1995) claims. Authority can function effectively without clarity of meaning. Consider cases such as Eritrea, where the government uses uncertainty as a central strategy of power (Bozzini, 2011, 2012). Consider vaguely worded 'catch-all' laws, the meaning of which is determined retrospectively by moral panics. Consider the doublethink involved in the 'war on terror', where the boundary between 'good' warmaking and 'bad' terrorism leads to a constant state of exception. Consider also the current political forms of identity politics, in which signifiers such as 'racism' are deployed by different speakers in different ways, but with an imperative force which renders it impossible to avoid the possibility of doing something 'racist'. Consider also the normal structure of totalitarian power – a situation where the rules are so unreasonable or vague that everyone breaks them in the course of daily life, and then relies on a power-holder's discretion to protect them from destruction. Against such forms of ambivalent discourse, there is much to be said for direct discourse, meaningful and falsifiable statements, and contingent, situational analysis in keeping power-holders accountable, conversations inclusive, and theoretical horizons open. Bhabha's style is not beyond authority. It creates a type of authority which is internally self-subverting, yet absolutely impervious to critique.

Does Aestheticised Writing Subvert Colonial Power?

Bhabha's approach follows from a wider tendency in postcolonial, decolonial, and other identity-inflected poststructuralist theory. Such theorists see themselves as attacking 'western reason' or 'modern reason'. There is generally a sense that 'western reason' is problematic (among other reasons, because it is white, male, middle-class, tied into dominant forms of power/knowledge, binarising, and body-denying). As Foucault argues, power and knowledge directly imply one another. Hence, the knowledge-systems of 'western reason' either cause, result from, or are co-constitutive with colonial forms of power. For Maldonado-Torres (2007) and Dussel (2000), for instance, the 'ego-cogito' of Cartesian philosophy is also the 'ego-conquiro' of colonial conquest. We are all still inside this modern/colonial worldview, which is often conceived as a nearly all-encompassing system. Overthrowing or moving beyond colonialism – transforming it into something else – requires that we overcome 'western reason'. Simply arguing against western reason is not enough, because the usual mode of argument also expresses the power of western reason. Western reason is literal and seeks truth and reality. Its “other” is poetic (LC, 134). Hence, a style is adopted which is taken to subvert western reason, and criticism of this style for obfuscation, or of specific statements made in this style, is often characterised as a power-move designed to reimpose western reason.

There is certainly an important point in the argument that western forms of thought (such as contradictory rather than complementary uses of opposites) are tied into patterns of domination. There is a connection, for instance, between rigid positivist racial categories and racial discrimination, between a technical view of power and modern long-range war-making, or between the valorisation of western knowledge and the practice of colonial schooling. But I don't think this argument necessarily leads to the stylistic changes many poststructuralists perform. Firstly, it is unclear that all forms of western knowledge are equally complicit in colonial power, let alone constitutive of it in a deep way. Such deep

complicity seems to be an item of faith for many theorists, rather than a clearly demonstrable claim. Secondly, the language used by authors such as Bhabha is incomprehensible to most 'subaltern' or marginal people. It also has little in common with 'subaltern' language, even in cases where such language also 'subverts' or frustrates dominant categories. Subaltern language may be poetic, in a dense, lived social context, but it is also often prosaic and direct. It might be possible to subvert dominant categories through language-play. This is shown to some degree in research by scholars such as James Scott (1990). Oppressed groups give their own meanings to dominant terms, applying them in ways which create subversive effects. Yet this is more likely if the play is carried out in 'subaltern' terms. For example, it would be interesting to see what becomes of theory were it to be written in street vernacular or slang. But this is rather different from the project of authors such as Bhabha.

Thirdly, clear language (such as the notorious middle-class 'elaborated speech code' [Bernstein, 1971]) has come into being partly because it enables easier communication across different contexts. Local speech codes may be dense in meaning, yet leave people open to manipulation outside their familiar context (see Hoggart, 1957). Simplification and clarity are often means to communicate across difference (for example, to speak to someone with limited literacy in a particular language). Using language which reduces ease of communication also reduces dialogue across difference, rendering speech-communities smaller and more exclusive. It also leaves the function of translation to the established, middle-class elite. Fourthly, the use of reasoning processes is by no means exclusive to colonisers. Indigenous groups have local knowledges, such as encyclopedic knowledge of local animals and plants, and extensive cosmologies depicting the relationships among different elements of their lifeworlds. Ancient Indian and Chinese imperial knowledges were if anything more schematic and totalising than those of the modern west. Resistance movements against colonialism also used reasoning processes such as those of popular education and military strategy. Derridean-inflected postcolonial theory offers surprisingly little in terms of concrete suggestions as to how to resist colonialism, in contrast to

authors such as Edward Saïd, Frantz Fanon and Samir Amin. Transgression of an allegedly colonial form frustrates opposition to a more blatantly colonial content.



Fifthly, the construction of a form of speech which is seemingly immune from rebuttal, which carries and articulates a very particular view of the world (e.g. a negative ontology, an ethos of humility towards the Other, a totalising view of the dominant system) itself risks colonising others. 'Subaltern' third parties are forced to adopt its terms of communication to be heard, and rejected as essentialist if they do not. This plays out in practice in the aggressive rejection of non-white critics by advocates of identity politics (see below, 980-95). Such attacks are unsurprising, given the ways postcolonial theory frames communication as a 'strategic' war. It fails to provide a non-colonising grammar which could articulate communication in non-dominatory ways. In this, it contrasts with the ideas of rhizome and affinity which are found in Deleuzian and anarchist traditions, and which are echoed by the more hopeful writers on 'transmodernity'. In my view, non-colonising communication has to aim for comprehensibility across difference, to be non-dogmatic about assumptions and style, and to be open to rebuttal and transformation through its contact with difference. The dominant poststructuralist style fails by these criteria, even while aspiring to decolonisation and dialogue.

But, enough on Bhabha's style. The remainder of this book focuses on the content of his arguments, insofar as I think I understand them. The next two chapters examine Bhabha's philosophy in more detail. They look at the social construction of categories, the importance of positionality, and Bhabha's view of subjectivity. They explore Bhabha's relationship to poststructuralism, provide a critique of the strong constructivism he adopts, and also examine the ways in which Bhabha analyses cultural texts and the role he assigns to culture. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 explore how the ambivalence of language plays out in particular cases: hybridity and in-betweenness, cultural difference, and the historical experience of colonialism. The remaining chapters look at the directly political implications, including Bhabha's sense of what counts as 'politics', his relationship to *Marxism Today*, his concrete demands and the new rights he proposes, the way in which he conceives political community, and his relationship to various political theories.

CHAPTER 2

Culture, Constructivism and Conflict:

The Language Model, Bhabha's Ontology, and the Postcolonial Standpoint

To understand Bhabha's analysis of culture and politics, it makes sense to start with his underlying philosophy. Bhabha embraces a social constructivist view of the world. Constructivism is the view that social life (in general or on a particular topic) is a 'social construct', an effect of ways of seeing, talking, and thinking about a topic. People “construct” the things they see or perceive through the linguistic categories they use, or the social practices or relations they engage in. Constructivism isn't a theory about whether particular objects exist outside of society and language. Rather, it maintains that the way each of us sees and experiences things is affected by the language and thoughts associated with them. Objects might exist outside language, but, if so, humans who are inside language can't access them. Constructivists therefore oppose 'essentialist' arguments which maintain that social realities can be traced to essential features of biology, reason or history.



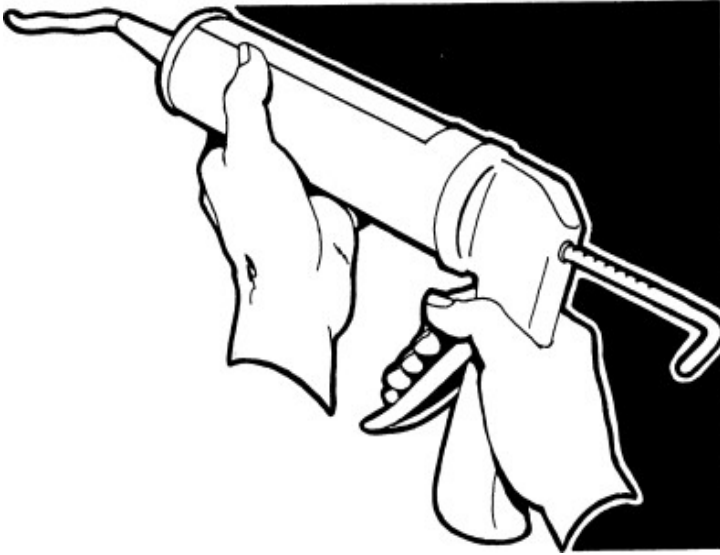
In a study of social constructivist arguments, Hacking (1999) argues that constructivism is mainly a political gesture. The claim that something is socially constructed is usually made when an aspect of social life seems obvious, “common sense”, unchanging, natural, or absolute. It suggests that the targeted aspect of social life is instead contingent and changeable. By showing everyday realities to be 'political' and contestable, constructivism

opens up space for social change – and sometimes even shows change to be morally obligatory. For example, constructivists argue that gender roles are constructed rather than natural. There's so much cross-cultural diversity, these roles couldn't possibly be natural. This usually leads to feminist conclusions. Women are oppressed by gender roles in most modern societies. Someone who thinks that gender roles are natural is less likely to be worried about gender inequality than someone who thinks gender roles are socially constructed.

Constructivist claims are usually made by people who want to change a particular aspect of social life which is seen by others as natural and obvious. Almost by definition, a constructed reality is not inevitable, need not exist, and is not just “the way things are”. It is something which can in principle be changed. Usually, the constructed reality is also said to be bad the way it is at the moment. The naturalisation of constructed realities – the perception of a constructed reality as common sense, natural, obvious and so on – is an effect of power. It puts these social practices beyond “reasonable” criticism. For example, if there are “natural” differences between genders or races, trying to make them equal seems as silly as trying to turn back the tide or make $2+2=5$. Constructivism undermines this blockage on critique by showing that gender and race are not natural. Hence as Hacking says, pointing out that something is constructed is a way of saying: 'don't tread on me with those heavy hegemonic (racist, patriarchal) boots of yours' (1999:19).

Any particular claim that something is socially constructed is usually debated. Often, historical and anthropological evidence can be mobilised to show that something is (at least partially) a social construct and that it could be otherwise. This evidence very much supports the view that gender roles and “race” are social constructs. We can show, for instance, that women do the manual work in some societies (Rwomire, 2001:208-9), that fatherhood is not a universal category (Hua, 2001), that the nuclear family is not universal (Gough, 1954), that some societies recognise three or more genders (Roscoe, 1998), that same-sex relationships were normal and accepted in ancient Greece (Hubbard, 2003), that

black/white “races” were not talked about before the eighteenth century (Allen, 1994), and that Europeans looked up to black African rulers such as Mansa Musa in the Middle Ages (Levtzion, 1973). This evidence is a lot stronger than the untestable speculations of evolutionary psychology which are mobilised by opponents of constructivism.



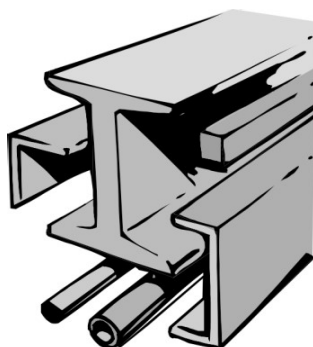
In a case where something is widely taken to be natural, obvious, or common sense, constructivism can be a very liberating view. For example, gay rights are helped when the idea of heterosexuality as normal and natural is shown to be a social construct. Women's rights are helped when roles and institutions like marriage, motherhood, and housework are shown to be social constructs – and not 'natural' roles of women. Critical race scholars often argue against racial stereotypes and categories of 'blackness' and 'whiteness' in this way (e.g. Allen, 1994; Ignatiev, 1996). They seek to show that ideas of 'black' and 'white' came into existence at a certain historical point. This is exemplified by Allen's statement: '[w]hen the first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619, there were no “white” people there; nor, according to the colonial records, would there be for another sixty years' (Allen, 1994:400). There were people from Europe, but they only started calling themselves

'white' in the 1680s. The emergence of ideas of 'white' and 'black' was associated with attempts to divide the emerging working-class and to create a regime of capitalist power based on racial segregation. The invention of 'whiteness' was connected to ideas of white superiority, the idea that 'blacks' are naturally slaves, and other early forms of racism. Since the categories are social constructs, they can also be overcome or 'abolished'.

However, I would add that there is also a downside to constructivism. It can be used to suggest that certain traits are malleable, and that people have a duty to change them. This can legitimise repressive forms of education, therapy, punishment, law and normativity. For example, if people aren't 'naturally' individuals, then it is harder to make an argument that the state should respect individual rights. If sexual desires are social constructs, then people can in principle be commanded to be attracted to certain other people, or types of people. The discursive barrier is lowered to intrusive measures intended to force people to change. And sometimes – even when something *is* a social construct – it may be relatively 'sticky' and not malleable. For example, psychoanalysis maintains that personality structures are formed in early childhood and are very difficult to change. Trying to change “behaviours” without first changing unconscious structures will fail, or set off unexpected psychological crises. Also, Marxism maintains that changes in culture and social roles usually require changes in the “mode of production”, the ways people get the things they need or desire. Trying to change “superstructures” (such as beliefs) without first changing “infrastructures” (or socio-economic relations) is idealist. It makes unrealistic demands which are unlikely to succeed and which blame individuals for social problems. And it distracts from the real issue of changing the social structure.

Conservative objections to theories like Bhabha's often suggest that attempts to remould what are actually natural features lead to totalitarian barbarism. Conservatives might cite cases such as Stalinist forced collectivisation of agriculture, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, or even fascism as examples of what goes wrong when people try to mess with nature. A more libertarian objection suggests that such processes ignore the role of

desire as the source of the urge to retain or change social relations. The project of remoulding people reduces them to ascribed categories, and is therefore hierarchical (see Firth and Robinson, 2017). Any project of remoulding also relies on a belief that the moulder knows how to change people. But knowledge is itself a social construct – and attempts to remould using ineffective techniques can backfire. For example, many attempts to remould people fall foul of the 'reactance effect' (see Brehm and Brehm, 1981). This is a psychological effect in which someone resents and avoids complying with orders or rules because they feel their freedom is threatened. This can even make people more likely to do prohibited things they previously had no desire to do! Another aspect which is usually neglected is the unconscious. Unless a new worldview finds roots in the affective and unconscious structure of its adherents, it is unlikely to command much passionate support. It will just be a ritualistic performance which breaks down at the first opportunity. Attempts to impose progressive changes by authoritarian means can sometimes do more to discredit progress than to enact change (see for example Khalil, 2014; Magyari-Vincze, 2008).



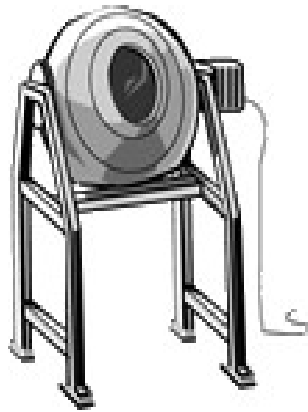
Yet another problem is that constructivism can also be used to show that taken-for-granted *progressive* beliefs are social constructs which can be changed. Ideas of racial equality, child abuse, rape, genocide, human rights, national self-determination and so on, and even established facts such as climate change and the Holocaust, are just as much 'social constructs' as objectionable right-wing ideas. They can only be “thought” in terms

of binary linguistic categories which make sense of reality in particular ways, and which could be “other” than they are. For example, it's demonstrably the case that nations are social constructs, and national identity did not exist before modernity. This could be used to argue that anti-colonial movements have no legitimate basis to oppose imperialist rule. Similarly, the idea of the “human” is a social construct. Not all societies recognise the idea of common humanity. This can be used to challenge universal human rights. And far-right speakers commonly argue that only a small number of human societies value racial equality. As we shall see below (105-6), constructivism is sometimes associated with relativism, and it is hard to justify ethical commitments from this point of view. This can be avoided if a division is introduced between aspects of life which are and aren't socially constructed. It's quite coherent to say, for example, that gender roles are constructed but the need to eat is biological. This is how Hacking suggests the theory normally works.

But this is not how constructivism works in Bhabha's thought. Some constructivist theories emphasise the ways in which everyday beliefs are created. 'Fields' such as high theory and high art are treated as special, autonomous systems of meaning which are largely limited to influencing their participants. Everyday life is analysed in terms of everyday forms of meaning-production – the role of education and the mass media, the way workers or peasants define their identities with their peers, and so on. However, Bhabha treats all of language and theory as if it is a single, holistic social field. Effects in one area can affect anything across the entirety of the social field. Academic knowledge-systems provide the basis for social systems of power, and their contestation similarly disrupts these systems of power.

I would argue that Bhabha's constructivism, and those of Lacan, Althusser and Derrida, are thus ontologically deeper than Hacking allows. They don't simply want to question particular constructed realities. They believe that everything is part of a single textual field (with the possible exception of ambivalences and gaps which are also effects of this field). It is particularly important for Bhabha that the 'modern subject' – the sense people

(especially white Europeans and Americans) have of themselves as agents and individuals – is a social construct. However, Bhabha embeds constructivism in his assumptions and style, in a way which takes it for granted. Unlike (for example) Edward Saïd, Bhabha is largely uninterested in doing the work of showing how particular ideas are not common to all societies everywhere in time and space. He largely assumes that constructivism is already established as true.

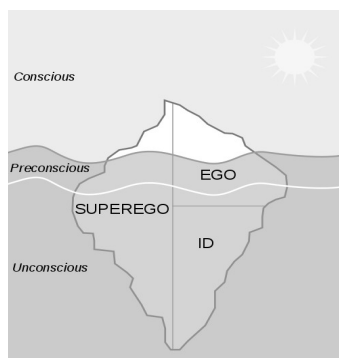


Bhabha's particular form of constructivism is largely poststructuralist. It is based on a 'language model'. This does not necessarily mean that 'everything is language' or 'language determines everything'. It means that the basic structure of language is taken to be the same as, or to determine, the basic structure of everything (or at least of everything a human can perceive and think about). The world might actually be a non-dualistic, holistic field of becoming, but if so, we can't access it – or at least, not through language. Also, Bhabha clearly thinks that some things, such as identity and desire, are effects of language. So, the scope of language in Bhabha's theory is fairly wide. In one passage, Bhabha suggests that 'the sign [i.e. language] is anterior [prior] to any site of meaning'. He calls for the disruption of reality-effects. The structure of language disrupts the possibility of signifying anything – and this should be celebrated (LC, 164). This passage comes very close to saying that everything is language and the extra-linguistic world is an illusion.

The poststructuralist language model also involves a particular view of how language works. In line with a structuralist approach, Bhabha assumes that language is a binary, differential system. Bhabha seems to deny completely that language has any function in terms of connecting to, or talking about, a non-linguistic world. It is differential (words refer to other words) rather than referential (words refer to things). It is thus a closed system which refers only to itself. In this model, images (or mental constructs of particular objects) are always effects of negation. All images are simply supplements of identities. Identities are constructed through the exclusion of plenitude or originality (i.e. of the holistic field of becoming). So, images require a primary exclusion. Images are therefore never 'mimetic' – representing or expressing something prior to them. They are metaphors for presence, and metonyms for absence (LC, 51). Identity is merely a 'sign' (LC, 50). This sign, like all signs, requires an 'other' – the Derridean supplement, the Lacanian thing (see below, 326-30, 357-64). The appearance of transparent or autonomous identity depends on the *hierarchical* articulation of this excluded other in relation to the self (LC, 109).

For Bhabha, any claim to presence or autonomy is necessarily fallacious (though maybe also necessary). Concepts depend on an 'other' which they exclude, and therefore cannot express something self-present or self-contained. The absent 'other' is necessarily part of the meaning of the concept, defining what it is *not*. Any claim always contains a proximate or 'extimate' other (see below, 326-30) which haunts it from the inside (LC, 59). The inner self, in a sense, doesn't really exist. Personal depth is an illusion. It's an effect of particular rhetorical strategies (see LC, 48). People do not signify. They are 'signified upon'. This makes people 'double-voiced' and 'doubly-articulated' (OF, 187). Any idea of an inner individual life is criticised as naive and oppressive. For instance, the idea of literature as an expression of authenticity and sincerity is a 'Romantic myth'. It does not apply to minority literatures (OF, 181). Subaltern subjects are double-voiced. They are caught somewhere between the dominant discourse and a different discourse (see Chapter 5). The moment

an agent emerges to tell her/his/their own story, one finds not an 'inner life' but a 'certain "strangeness" of alienation' (PAS, 69-70). Things turn 'close and strange', 'external' reality becomes smotheringly 'intimate', and one finds oneself 'within oneself, and with others', in a moment where co-constitution is recognised. A Levinasian ethic (see below, 96-7, 683-94) results (PAS, 70). This situation is 'incommensurable with individualist or idealist "identity"' (OF, 186). The magic of ambivalence works when people come to feel signified-upon, rather than signifying (OF, 187). Perhaps the goal of Bhabha's writing is to make readers feel signified-upon, in the hope of producing a Levinasian ethical breakthrough.



Most psychoanalysts agree with the basic idea that the ego is not the master of its own house, that there are unconscious or invisible levels of subjectivity. This does not necessarily entail co-constitution. The smothering over-presence of theories like Bhabha's is produced by the additional belief that these invisible forces *are actually present in, or known to, 'the other'* (i.e. to another person). Bhabha's inbetweenness involves 'a "turning" towards the asymmetric neighbour or stranger', an 'uncanny movement by which "the master of the house is at home, but nonetheless he comes to enter his home through the guest – who comes from outside"' (ONO, 7). Hence, Bhabha encourages identification 'with the unconscious of the other' (ONO, 9). The unconscious is not simply invisible, or accessible only through clinical psychoanalysis in depth. It is present in other people. This belief involves swingeing claims about the nature of others' inner lives and the relationship of

their unconscious aspects to another person's conscious beliefs. It involves a reconciliation of sorts between the idea of an invisible unconscious and the surface-only, cybernetic view of social power as strategic interpersonal manipulation, nudging, and feedback. The ability to read off others' invisible motives or conditioning from their surface "behaviour", and bring it to consciousness and/or provide feedback to manipulate it, is central to the currently prevalent fusion of cognitivism, behaviourism and cybernetics. The unconscious, in this sense, is not really unconscious at all. It is just a word for visible, knowable, external social forces which might be invisible to a particular person. In contrast, a Lacanian analyst is often silent, or reflects the analysand's discourse back to them. They do not assert a particular substantive content to be the content of the analysand's unconscious. The Lacanian or Freudian unconscious is not simply something one is unaware of. It is unknowable due to repression. It takes a long time, and a skilled therapist, for someone to ever see what is behind the repression.

This rejection of any idea of an inner life of the 'self' gives significant power to the 'other'. An extimate other can disrupt language from the inside, rupturing the illusion of self-presence. The metonymic or subaltern moments of language (which relate to the extimate other) actually structure language as a whole (LC, 59). There is no knowledge without representation, and all representation follows the language model (LC, 23). This basic structure is decisive in generating the patterns of movement, discrimination, anxiety, paranoia and so on, which characterise colonial power (LC, 59). In other words, colonial power is in constant contact with an extimate other which disrupts it. This is true not only of colonial power, but of all power. The same thing which gives a sign authority also disrupts this authority (e.g. LC, 147). For Bhabha, we should celebrate the 'erasure of content in the invisible but insistent structure of linguistic difference', 'the overpowering of content by the signifier' (LC, 164). In other words, we should celebrate the loss of knowledge of the world, because of the structure of language. We should celebrate the loss of the 'reality-effect', the experience of a world beyond language. We should celebrate a language which refers only to itself.

In this sphere of constructed discourse, people (or groups) struggle to exist. Bhabha sees culture as a 'strategy of survival'. It is translational and transnational. It is always constructed or invented. It is an uneven, incomplete process through which meaning and value are produced. It is often composed of radically different demands and practices (FBI, 47), which are joined together more-or-less arbitrarily because of their strategic usefulness. Everyday actions are thus always already theoretical and cultural. Everything people do is a move in a game involving a slippage of signifiers. For example, a British Muslim might use family and religion to protect them from social pressures, and/or use claims to equality and rights to access resources like education. These are strategic moves at the level of signification. They also produce newness in the world. History happens when signifiers slip and fixed categories are blurred (LC, 25). For Bhabha, this activity of strategic signification is basically the same thing as critical theory. Hence, Bhabha criticises the idea that theory is necessarily an elite or privileged language (LC, 19). In contrast, he sees theory as present in everyday practices. However, it often seems to be left to Bhabha himself to interpret the theoretical meaning of everyday actions – and most of his analysis is still focused on 'high' theory and culture, outside the everyday life of the poor.



Because meaning is always an effect of difference, and of the bar between signifier and signified, it can never involve essence or identity. In other words, a concept or image cannot 'mean' anything *in itself*. It can mean something only in relation to its other (e.g. the word “dog” has meaning only as something differing from “cat” or “human”). This means

that the slippage caused by the other is inherent to meaning as such. Processes of translation and mimicry are necessary parts of culture. They are not limited to secondary situations of cross-cultural contact. They are constitutive of culture as such. It might seem like mimicry and translation only happen when (say) English culture is exported by colonisers to countries such as India, or Indians migrate to England. But in fact, these processes are at the heart of English culture, Indian culture, and any possible culture. They were already going on, before English colonisers reached India.

This means that identity is always, in a sense, an illusion. Identity arises from a relationship to an 'other' which co-constitutes it, without which it has no meaning. However, in Bhabha's view, we aren't supposed to simply do without identity. We are supposed to keep building identity, while recognising its contingency. Identity is only possible by negating the originality and completeness it claims (Byrne, 2009:13). This analysis of identity has political effects. It precludes political movements and ideologies which are focused on reclaiming a denied identity. There was never a pre-colonial Indian identity which English colonisation simply disrupted. Nor was there ever an English identity which was disrupted by migration, globalisation, or European integration. Projects of returning to, or advancing towards, a completed identity without its other are fundamentally misguided. For instance, Fetson Kalua (2009) uses Bhabha's theory to criticise the idea of an African Renaissance. He argues that African identity, like all identity, is necessarily deferred. This kind of argument also puts Bhabha at odds with anti-colonial nationalism, as we shall see (below, 212-19, 861-82).

Following Lacan, Bhabha criticises European poststructuralism for minimising the importance of depth. The appearance of reality and representation is not simply an illusion. It is the result of a particular reality-effect, tied up with the creation of what is called the 'fourth wall' in cinema and theatre (LC, 48). The fourth wall is the wall separating the fictional reality from the audience – as on a set where a house has three walls, and the fourth is open to the viewer (think of how the viewer seems to be looking

into someone's home in, say, a soap opera). The phrase “breaching the fourth wall” means that someone within the fictional reality has recognised that the reality is fictional or the audience is there. When it is not breached, the fourth wall gives the impression that the fictional reality is real, even when the audience knows it is not.

According to Bhabha, it is this domain of depth – related to the articulation of conscious and unconscious, the subjects of enunciation and of the statement – which makes identity seem real, and which makes the discourse of identity effective (LC, 48). Identity is tied-up with memory. According to Bhabha, identity – particularly western identity – is primarily an *image*. It is associated with the idea of a reflection in a mirror (LC, 49). Western culture treats one's relations to objects and oneself as analogous to visual perception (LC, 49). But visual perception is an expression of a type of power, the 'scopic drive' or drive to objectify others (LC, 76). The idea of 'the real me' is actually a sign, an image. And it is formed through the exclusion of an idea of original plenitude, prior to linguistic differentiation (LC, 51). The scopic drive, the 'love of the eye' and the 'avoidance of the gaze', is central, for instance, to 'rational, national identification' in Europe (ANNS, 205). National identity is founded on the 'absent presence' of an imaginary father, by analogy with Lacan's mirror stage (ANNS, 206; c.f. below, 351-2).

In reality, textuality is prior to visual experience (LC, 127). The power of modernity does not lie in events themselves. It is a narration and a 'spectacle' (LC, 243). Bhabha constantly seeks to replace visual relations with textual relations, and substantive content with discursive power-struggles. For example, he states that, 'if the epistemological tends towards a *reflection* of its empirical referent or object, the enunciative attempts repeatedly to reinscribe and relocate the political claim to cultural priority and hierarchy' (LC, 177). He clearly prefers the latter to the former. Epistemology is locked into closed circles of knowledge. In contrast, enunciation is supposedly dialogical. Epistemology turns others into objects, whereas enunciation turns people into 'subjects of history' (LC, 177-8). In practice, “dialogue” may come down to little more than interpreting and classifying others'

positions – in Bhabha's words, tracking displacements and realignments. And subjectivity seems empty if people are merely effects of discourses. Still, Bhabha sees this as far preferable to “representation”.



These ideas come from Lacanian theory. Lacan believes that young children form their sense of themselves as separate beings through an encounter with their image in the mirror. This is known as the 'mirror stage', and gives rise to the ego. The subjects of enunciation and the statement are also Lacanian concepts. According to Lacan, every statement both articulates a conscious content expressed in the exact claim made, and an unconscious intersubjective demand or self-positioning articulated below the surface. One of the roles of the analyst is to see and speak to the unconscious aspect and not just the conscious statement. In some parts of Bhabha's work, the crucial disruptive force comes from the object staring back. In others, reflexivity and autobiography are taken to disrupt the separation of subject and object (LC, 150). Bhabha's view relies on a particular ontology in which textuality is prior to, and more “real” than, sensory experience. And a lot rides on this foundational assumption. If Bhabha is wrong about this, then his approach amounts to overwriting material sensory relations with verbal sophism.

Bhabha's approach to the formation of personal and social identity is derived from a number of French structuralist and poststructuralist theorists. **Structuralists** believe that language is primarily a system of differences. It does not refer to external objects. Instead, different concepts make sense only in relation to one another. The colour "black" is recognisable as a distinct colour because it is different from "white", "grey", "red" and so on. A "dog" is a "dog" because it is not a cow, or a sheep, or a cat. Although there are several distinct alternatives to most categories, structuralists focus on **binary oppositions** or dualisms. These are cases where two distinct categories are defined exclusively – for example, there is only black and white. For structuralists, this is the simplest, most basic, original form of language. It is primary over the referential use of language to refer to objects in the world.

Language as a system (*langue*) can be distinguished from specific instances of speech (*parole*). There is also a difference between the **content** of a statement – the words which are spoken, the grammar, and so on – and the **enunciation**, or act of speaking. For classical structuralists such as Saussure, the linguistic structure is more-or-less objective. It provides a pool of resources which individual speakers draw upon to obtain the resources for particular speech-acts. The structuralist focus on binaries is actually borrowed from cybernetics – the study of how computers or 'thinking machines' can be created. Computers are designed to function in terms of binaries – usually zeros and ones – and become more complicated by processing more and more binaries, more and more quickly. Structuralists assumed that this structure shows the basic structure of human thought and language as well. This might be why poststructuralism fits in with neoliberal capitalism, according to some of its critics. Cybernetic models also underpin much of contemporary capitalism, organisation theory, pop psychology and so on. The 'information society' is built on computer technologies which use binary oppositions in their most basic functions.

Structuralism was fashionable in 1950s France, and was developed in different ways by writers like Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. The main pioneer of the use of structuralism to understand identity was the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Lacan merged structuralism with Freudian theory to suggest that personal identity is an effect of language. What humans are, or think we are, is primarily an effect of language. We are situated in language before we are born. We learn language in early childhood, at the same time as we develop our sense of self and our basic personality-structure. Our entry into language changes what we are. From this point forward, everything we experience, believe, think or feel is affected by our position inside language. Even the unconscious is part of language and structured like language – it is not a vital or substantive 'inner life' the analyst tries to access. Lacanian psychoanalysis is thus rather different from Freudian, Jungian or Reichian variants. It places much more emphasis on the outer, social/symbolic world as the source of inner processes.

However, the individual actor – known as the '**subject**' – is always a problem in language. The person who speaks is not the same as the abstract words – personal pronouns, names, social categories – which are applied to them, or which they claim. There is a constitutive gap which prevents our ever being fully present in language – which prevents words from ever referring to the 'subject' who speaks. The '**subject of enunciation**', the person who speaks, is different from the '**subject of the statement**' (*énoncé* in French), who is spoken about – even when we speak about ourselves. When people use the word "I", they implicitly claim that there is a subject who speaks – a speaker, referred to as "I". This is the subject of the statement. It is basically the same as the 'ego' in psychoanalysis. The subject of enunciation is the unconscious subject – who is spoken about, or is an effect of language. This second subject can be seen in the words which are spoken, and not in the

attribution of an “I”. The real subject who speaks is always different from the “I” they speak about. The act of speaking carries a meaning which is distinct from the words which are said. In fact, the word “I” doesn't really signify anything at all – it is a “shifter” which points to the person who makes the statement. It doesn't tell the listener anything about the person making the statement, and one can figure out who it refers to only from the context – not from the signifier itself. Of course, this means that people like Kant, Locke and Descartes are completely wrong about the nature of the individual! The source of speech is not the thinking self, the ego or consciousness – it is the unconscious.



The subject of enunciation is revealed in the act of speaking, rather than the spoken words. Speech is always an appeal to the other – associated with the '*che moi?*' process (see below, 92-3). A psychoanalyst or critic can see this second subject in the undercurrent of language and the things someone says without “meaning it” - such as Freudian slips and revealing turns of phrase. The analyst gives the patient their message back in its 'true-inverted' form, the form reflecting the subject of enunciation and showing the incompleteness of the subject of the statement. (This is similar to how Bhabha sees colonialism reacting back on modernity). Human life is a series of different attempts to bridge, or come to terms with, this gap. Another aspect of Lacan's theory is that the linguistic structure is not really objective at all. People try to imagine that it's objective, so as to give order to the world. But in fact, the structure does not really exist at all. It is something people assume, rather than something which actually exists.

The gap between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the statement is the reason language cannot be a referential system, or 'code'. According to Lacanian theory, each person's identity – like other categories in language – is defined by its '*other*'. The 'other' is the category from which something is distinguished in order for it to make sense. Just as black is black because it isn't white or red, so the self is the self because it isn't the other (often capitalised, as the Other, in Lacanian writings). However, the self's desire and motivation is in a sense a mystery for language. For Lacan (in contrast to Deleuze/Guattari and Reich), desire is first of all about the 'Other'. A desiring subject first of all desires recognition and validation from its 'Other' (which can either be another individual person, or the social order as a whole). Lacan also thinks that desire is tied-up with lack. Each person desires what they think the Other desires – which is to say, what the Other lacks. For instance, they desire to be what the other person wants, so they are needed by the other person and thus validated. This means that the self's desires are always the desires of 'the Other'. (The first form of this process is that a baby tries to satisfy the mother or primary carer, on whom its survival depends). According to Lacan, people therefore define themselves in terms of what they are for the Other. In particular, children define themselves as what they are for their parents. As a result, the Other is both excluded from the self – a process constitutive of the identity of the self – and included in it as definitive of the self's desire and identity. This carries on throughout life, in romantic attachments, political demands, working relationships, friendships and so on.

This simultaneous exclusion and inclusion of the Other is the source of many of the patterns of enjoyment and suffering in human life. The Other's desire is enigmatic. One can never know what the Other desires. Other individual people also have desires formed in this enigmatic way, which are relative to what they think their Other wants. And the big Other, the social

order, doesn't really even exist. This means that people never simply desire something, and desires are not outside or prior to language. Desire always passes through the question '*che vuoi*' – what does the Other want, or what am I for the Other? People's true desires are also often unconscious, and concealed or disavowed in the things they consciously believe they desire. People's demands often go further than what they need, because they also carry the demand to be desired, loved, or validated. In Lacan's view, desire is also determined by lack, and has to remain unsatisfied to be sustained. The 'space of desire' is only kept open when the object of desire is lacking – otherwise, the object stops standing for the other's lack and is no longer 'desired' in the unconscious sense. The object of desire is continually deferred. (This view was criticised by people like Deleuze, Guattari and the Situationists, who associate desire with the lived experience of a flow-state, and not with lack).



The structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser applied Lacan's theory to politics. Althusser pioneered the idea that our sense of ourselves as 'subjects' is tied up with social categories. We aren't born as black, white, men, women, working-class or middle-class – or as an ego, subject, or consciousness. Rather, we are

'interpellated' into these categories through social processes. '**Interpellation**' is a kind of incident where someone makes a demand on someone else, calls them out and defines what they are. Althusser's example is a cop stopping someone in the street. Frantz Fanon provides a good example of interpellation when he discusses an incident when he was living in France. A French child pointed at him and said to his mother: 'Look, mummy, a Negro, I'm scared!' This interpellated Fanon as a scary 'Negro', as someone white people should be afraid of – and he came to think of himself, in some ways, as a 'scary Negro', because this is what he is for the Other. Notice the difference here from the usual idea of stereotyping – the idea that the French child misattributed a false representation to Fanon. In Althusserian theory, people usually become what they are interpellated as. A stereotype does not simply misrepresent. It turns people into whatever they are represented as. People are interpellated as subjects by being subjected to the gaze of authority.

It is because this gaze defines them as subjects, and thus gives them freedom, that people voluntarily submit to authority. An interpellation 'works' when someone recognises themselves as the person who is addressed. (Some people, 'bad subjects', are not successfully interpellated).

Althusser uses this theory to interpret '*ideology*' – the main reason people identify with and continue to conform to oppressive systems. For Althusser, ideology is not a set of false ideas. It is the way people relate to, and thereby reproduce, their life conditions. It is an effect of people's practices and the social 'apparatuses' which act upon them, interpellating them in particular ways. From outside its own frame, an ideology often looks like false consciousness. It is as if there are black holes distorting the language around certain points. But it isn't really false consciousness. It determines people's sense of themselves as 'subjects', and therefore, the ways in which the world makes sense. How we experience ourselves is always an effect of ideology. In fact, the main social function of ideology is to produce people as subjects. There are no subjects without ideology – but for Althusser it is possible to have a subjectless discourse (or 'science') which is non-ideological.

Althusser pioneered a method known as 'symptomatic reading', which attempted to situate a text in ideology, through its gaps or 'lacunae' – the things it leaves out. This – like Lacan's idea of the subject of enunciation – authorises a style of interpretation which refuses to engage with an opponent's substantive claims, and instead seeks to reconstruct their "real motives" in the unconscious, structural realm. In the wrong hands, such a style can involve clumsily dismissing opposing views based on a projection of one's own theoretical assumptions. Bhabha embraces Althusser's theory when he defines ideology as 'what we think we see without really looking' (DTDA, 20). People's habitual ways of interpreting the world are effects of unconscious ideological structures.

In Althusserian theory, it is assumed that people normally internalise and identify with these kinds of socially-ascribed categories. If someone is interpellated as dangerous, inferior, underdeveloped, and so on, they will come to see themselves in these terms, and even to act as if these terms are true. If an entire group are interpellated in a certain way, the group will also tend to act as if the categories are true. There is some evidence for this in 'labelling theory' – a sociological literature which shows that labelling people as deviant makes them increasingly deviant (e.g. Lemert, 1967; Cohen, 1972). They internalise and act on the deviant identity. Take the case of police profiling particular communities (usually black and/or poor) as high-risk groups likely to commit crime. These communities are then subjected to police harassment and abuse. Some people redefine their identities in relation to the constant antagonism they experience with the police. And their other opportunities become even more blocked than they were before, because of the stigma attached to the community. This pushes people towards crime, as a way to reassert agency and get around blockages. Or, suppose police profile someone as a suspected terrorist on dubious evidence. The person will become increasingly frustrated with the harassment they receive from the police, and maybe become more sympathetic to terrorism. The act of profiling is often a self-fulfilling prophecy. It brings about the very result it is meant to prevent. However, people don't always become what they are believed socially to be, and this is a limit to theories like Bhabha's. For example, most Muslims never become terrorists. There is a danger of reinforcing stereotypes if one assumes that stereotypes always constitute what people really are.

Derrida and Levinas take this approach to identity further from its roots in structuralism. For Derrida, language is always ambiguous and split. Every category requires its 'other', which it is defined against. For instance, black requires white. This means that pure, '**self-present**' instances of any category cannot exist. Language is always haunted by an ambiguity.

Everything which is black is also white, and vice-versa. The meaning of a statement is always different and deferred. This leads to a slippage, or play, among signifiers (words). Like Lacan, Derrida believes we are always inside a social '**text**' defined by language and socially-constructed categories. So as to 'perform' the ambiguity of language, Derrida deliberately adopted a style which hid or complicated the meaning of what he said. He sought to expose hidden roots of philosophy so as to move beyond philosophy. This style has influenced Bhabha, and most of today's poststructuralist and postcolonial writers.

The Jewish theologian Emmanuel Levinas was a major influence on Derrida. He believed that the **Other** (capitalised in his work) is a constitutive aspect of the human experience. It is completely different from the Self and is not accessed through the ego, desire, self-interest and so on. Rather, people face a recurring encounter with the Other as absolutely different. The Other makes a kind of ethical claim or demand on the Self which cannot be avoided or resisted. This claim is the basis for moral duty. It is also constitutive of what we are as humans. For Levinas, the Other refers both to real others – for example, other people – and to God as the absolutely Other. Through our local encounters with others who are different from us, we're actually coming into contact with God.

This leads to an other-centric ethics. Humility before the Other, loss of ego-desires and submission to the Other as something the self can never grasp or understand, is an ethical virtue in this tradition. Levinas values 'responsibility' as the main ethical principle, rather than rights, freedom, welfare or order. We are at once required to be responsible towards the Other and unable to satisfactorily fulfil this duty (see below, 683-90). This leaves us in a situation of eternal guilt and insufficiency, similar to the doctrine of original sin. It is through Derrida's appropriation of Levinas that celebration of the '**incommensurability**' (radical difference, irreducibility

to common meaning) of the 'Other' (including real, human and nonhuman others) has become an ethical as well as an analytical focus in poststructuralism.

For postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha, the encounter of white colonisers with colonised peoples is an exemplary encounter with the Levinasian Other. In practice, the performance of responsibility to the Other often takes the form of dwelling on one's privilege and complicity in dominant power. It entails seeking to purge oneself of socially conditioned oppressive 'behaviours' and thoughts, apologetically accepting aggressive call-outs by members of oppressed groups, and acting as a subordinate in campaigns led by more-oppressed people. The hunting-down of 'ego' and 'privilege' behind their various ruses and disguises is a central aspect of this style of politics. This rarely feels empowering for 'privileged' people, and it often turns into mutual competition among the oppressed subjects who are meant to be empowered by it. However, participants are reassured that they are fighting the roots of social oppression, destroying within themselves the social constructs which cause the problems they see in the outer world.

This said, it should be remembered that, for Derrida and Levinas, successful achievement of justice for the Other – known as the 'to-come' (see below, 304-8) – is necessarily, constitutively impossible. The Other is absolutely Other, and the worldly regimes of law and power can never satisfactorily do justice to it. The aim of this approach is to keep people permanently at the point at which the meaning-effect of the existing order breaks down, and the ambiguity and constructedness of language and reality become visible. One cannot pass beyond this point to a liberated world. Like the object of desire in Lacan, liberation has to be desired, but cannot be achieved.

Social constructivism has a particular slant in Bhabha's work, which is common to many poststructuralist approaches. It is not primarily about micro-social construction of new meanings by individuals in intersubjective relations. For some constructivists, people can socially construct new meanings through interactions at a small-group or person-to-person level. Not for Bhabha or his main influences. Since people's identities are effects of language, such novel construction is precluded. Bhabha's constructivism is also not about cross-cultural comparison between cultures assumed to be separate. This is taken to be fallacious because cultures are co-constitutive. Instead, the 'society' which does the 'constructing' is treated as a more-or-less integrated totality, identified with the structure of language on a classical structuralist model. Everything is an effect of this holistic, general field. Bhabha's theory seems to rely on a kind of psychological universalism in which the self and other are always already part of a single psychological landscape. People are co-constituted as effects of this landscape. World literature, for example, is no longer about transmitting self-contained traditions. It is about how people 'recognize themselves through their projections of "otherness"' (LC, 12).

Bhabha thinks that discourse always operates on this kind of deep, intimate level. People have a deeply felt need to 'relate to each other at the level of the unconscious, through projections, fantasies, defensive and compensatory strategies'. People want access to themselves and others 'at the level at which we are least accessible and most vulnerable' (DM1, 185). For Bhabha, socially-expressed projections are actually the most important part of the self. This explains Bhabha's critique of positions which reject projection onto others and call for mutual recognition. For Bhabha, such tendencies are ineliminable. They are also a way to exercise disruptive social power. Bhabha foresees and pre-emptly claims that engagement on such an intimate level is invasive or smothering. 'This is not an invasion of privacy. It is an acceptance of the complex, psych[ological] negotiations that accompany our interactions and utterances' (DM1, 186). If co-constitution is necessarily already present in all discourse, then Bhabha does not have to worry about its invasive

properties. It is perfectly suitable, not only for clinical psychoanalysis, but for theory, politics, and art.

In another passage, Bhabha encourages a movement 'to and fro', between inner self and external world, 'transforming external reality into an intimate relation, within oneself and with others'. This leads to 'the agent's consciousness of "being together" in the very act of recognition – of *seeing oneself as another*' (ONO, 18). As we shall see in Bhabha's discussions of politics (Chapters 9, 13, 15), he is very insistent on distinguishing this kind of co-constituted recognition both from "humanist" recognition of similarities between self and other and from recognition based on a respectful distance from other individuals or groups. The distinct aspect of Bhabha's view is that it treats others' *difference* as something one can see oneself – more precisely, one's unconscious – in.



This field of social construction is also identified with 'textuality' or language. Bhabha explicitly takes the view that writing is the basic 'productive matrix' of social life (LC, 23). Textuality or 'writing' has a broad meaning here. It refers to processes structured by the ambiguity of signifiers – the self/other or differential relation discussed above. The crucial aspects of writing which construct social life are rhetoric and metaphor (LC, 23). Following Derrida, Bhabha sees all forms of action which leave some kind of mark as forms of writing. For instance, social and visual actions are forms of writing (SPD, 366). Though broad, this field of 'writing' or 'textuality' is also given primacy. Other levels of social life (for example, bodily experiences, emotions, desires) are taken to be effects of cultural 'writing'. This means that, from his own point of view, Bhabha's interventions in the interpretation of culture strike at the most basic level of the social system. Language is

not only, as Bhabha insists, *not* to be viewed as a secondary aspect or 'superstructure' (as in Marx's model, where superstructures are secondary effects of material infrastructures). It is treated in his work as the infrastructure, of which other forms of social life are either outgrowths or aspects.

However, this does not mean that everything exists at the *literal* level of language. Indeed, Bhabha denies the importance of this level (see above, 20-1). He believes the most basic level of language is an imaginary level of projection, fantasy, and co-constitution. People seek to relate to one another at deep, unconscious levels. This belief authorises symptomatic reading, or the inference of structural features or motives which are not present in the surface discourse. Hence, Bhabha claims that the 'gestural' aspects of language 'have to be interpreted as if there is a kind of "unconsciousness" at work within them' (DM1, 185). (However, Bhabha is generally careful to suggest that these elements do not reflect conscious or unconscious motives of actual people. They reflect some variety of textual positioning). This is consistent with Lacan and Althusser. Rather confusingly, Bhabha calls this indirect, metaphorical level of communication 'dialogical'. On the other hand, literal language is seen as a kind of facade which maintains the illusions of the ego. It needs to be disrupted to reach the "real", fantasmatic level underneath. This is sometimes discussed in terms of a distinction between signs and symbols (see below, 457-9). The space of inbetweenness and effective subversion is the space of signs and fantasies, not the space of direct communication. As we shall see (below, 187-211), symptomatic reading is often rather distant from the text which is being "read". To a critic, it seems like misreading. However, there is a circularity to justifications for symptomatic reading which allows Bhabha (and others) to sidestep such criticisms. Any examination of whether a symptomatic reading really uncovers a latent level – or whether it simply projects meanings from outside a text – has to occur at the level of direct, surface discourse. And the whole point of symptomatic reading is that direct, surface discourse is a false cover. Belief in a particular model of the underlying structure of texts is articulated as an article of faith.



The Sokal Hoax

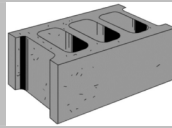
Bhabha engages substantively with criticisms of poststructuralism in a particular context. In 1996, the scientist Alan Sokal managed to get a hoax article published in the poststructuralist cultural studies journal *Social Text*. The article was sprinkled with name-dropping and buzzwords, but Sokal deliberately made scientifically inaccurate claims and advocated pseudo-science. After the success of the hoax, Sokal co-authored a book attacking 'postmodernism' for its alleged misuse of science (Sokal and Bricmont, 1997/1999). He accused 'postmodernists' such as Lacan, Derrida and Foucault (and implicitly also Bhabha) of writing trendy, jargon-ridden works with no substantive content. 'Postmodernists' reputedly believe that nothing exists except language, and that the external world is not real. This claim is a simplification of the disagreements between constructivists and realists, and involves a simplification of the constructivist position.

The hoax and the follow-up book were both major media events in the 'culture wars', and attracted support from scholars (both left-wing and right-wing) who objected to the growing influence of poststructuralism and its identity-based spin-offs. Bhabha presumably recognised himself as one of the implied targets of the hoax. The 'culture wars' between constructivism and realism seemed to die down in the 2000s, and critiques like Sokal's became less common. But this style of critique has become fashionable again recently, appearing for example in the work of Jordan Peterson. Peterson sees 'postmodernism' as a communist conspiracy against western values, and blames it for the alleged excesses of identity politics today. He uses these claims to support a number of reactionary positions.



The phenomenon of hoaxing has also become more widespread. The use of academic metrics has encouraged the proliferation of fake journals serving as citation machines. Students have proven that it is possible to get hoax abstracts composed of computer-generated gibberish accepted at conferences in 'respectable' scientific fields such as quantum theory and computing. In biology, there are papers in circulation on the habits of nonexistent 'drop bears' which have been serially cited in genuine academic papers. And at one stage, a carefully created fake academic profile was among the top most-cited scientists in the world. This certainly puts the Sokal Hoax in a different context! In 2018, another hoax team managed to successfully publish seven hoax articles targeting social justice research areas such as postcolonial studies. These included a paper based on an excerpt from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and another written mainly with an online poetry generator (Lindsay et al., 2018).

We have seen above that Bhabha inherits from Lacan, Althusser, Levinas and Derrida a range of quite specific ideas. These include language as a system of differences, 'the subject' as a problem, subjectivity as an effect of interpellation, desire as an effect of the *che vuoi* mechanism, an ethics of the Other, and so on. Lacan, Althusser and Derrida are all social constructivists. Their theories would make little sense unless they were! But people often conflate constructivism with these particular doctrines – for example, with the non-existence of 'the subject'. However, these approaches are a particular spin on constructivism. Their specific claims do not necessarily follow from social constructivism itself. They involve a particular combination of constructivism with structuralist theories of language, psychoanalytic views of subject-formation, and an Other-centred ethical theory.



Social constructivism is actually much older than poststructuralism. Social anthropologists have observed that socially-defined categories have effects on people's identities and actions for well over a century. For example, gender norms observably vary between societies. People often believe their society's version of being a "man" or "woman" (or sometimes third-gender) is "natural". But in fact, we can see that it is a social construct. For example, Yoruba people traditionally thought it was "natural" for women, not men, to trade goods at markets. This provides support for poststructuralists when arguing with realists, who believe that the outer world and its categories are objective and real. However, it does not necessarily support the whole assemblage of poststructuralism, against other kinds of constructivism.

Various sociological theories, such as symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, similarly insist that most of social life is constructed. Social roles and actions are influenced by contingent social norms, values and concepts, rather than being natural and essential. If we change the meanings, we can change the actions and how they are seen. Some of these constructivists placed a strong emphasis on the influence of language. However, they rarely adopted a structuralist theory of language. They also did not see language as being as deeply constitutive of individual identity as poststructuralists assume. They believed in a type of human agent who could socially construct the world. Many of them valued attempts to understand and make sense of difference by showing how things were differently constructed in different cultures or subcultures. Some advocated political strategies based on constructing different kinds of lives.



There are also weaker forms of constructivism which maintain a belief in an objective reality. They say that reality is either too complicated for humans to understand, or that it provides too little information for people to decide rationally among different points of view. Still others believe that some things (like nationalism, fashion, and job requirements) are social constructs whereas others (like nature and the body) are not. In addition, most of the original poststructuralists – Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Foucault – did not believe in the entire cluster of beliefs, orientations and aesthetic elements which have come to define poststructuralism in the English-speaking world. It is only after they are brought together into a single simplified theory by Anglophone poststructuralists that they came to seem part of a coherent perspective.

An opponent of social constructivism might be called an ontological “*realist*”, an “*essentialist*”, a “*foundationalist*” or a “*reductionist*”. These subtly different philosophical names all refer to beliefs that some points of view, or aspects of life, are more “real” or important than others. For example, poststructuralists generally believe that gender is a social construct – it is an effect of linguistic categories. This view is supported by cross-cultural evidence. Someone who insists that gender is an effect of biological sexual differences which are prior to, or independent of, social processes is called a “biological essentialist”. Most realists recognise that some things are social constructs. They might accept, for instance, that gender is a social construct. But they believe that other things exist objectively, in an outer world separate from human language. Realists believe that propositions or truth-claims can be tested against the external world and shown to be true or false. Most of the dominant approaches in today’s social and natural sciences are realist. In practice, most Marxists today are also realists – although there are also constructivist versions of Marxism (autonomists and Open Marxists are not necessarily realists). A “foundationalist” believes that some things are more basic than others, and the less basic things can be traced back to the more basic ones. A “reductionist” believes that some things can be “reduced” to – or understood in terms of – other things.

Opponents sometimes suggest that constructivism is not just wrong in epistemology. It leads to *moral relativism* – the idea that all viewpoints are equally valid. Moral relativism means, for instance, that a racist account is as valid as an anti-racist account, since there are no objective criteria to choose between them. It’s suggested, for instance, that relativism encourages Holocaust denial and pseudoscience. This line of criticism was common in radical critiques of “postmodernism” in the 1980s-90s (e.g. O’Neill, 1994; Hill et al., 1999; Code, 1995; Chapman, 1996). Bhabha’s theory is clearly not relativist – for instance, he favours ambivalence over fixity and purity,

colonised over coloniser, and subversion over antagonism. However, it sometimes seems that his preferences are arbitrary. His totalising holism and the influence of Levinas's ethics of the Other are part of the way Bhabha avoids relativism. Similarly, Derrida may well have adopted Levinas's ideas because of criticisms of the relativism of his earlier work.

The word “*materialist*” is not equivalent to realism or essentialism. “Materialism” means that someone thinks that processes in the world of “matter” are more important than those in the world of “mind” - as opposed to “idealism”, which maintains that mind is more important than matter. For a materialist, either everything is matter, and mental states are particular kinds of matter - or else, mental states are determined by states of matter. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, this distinction made sense because “mind” and “matter” were commonly used philosophical concepts. But today, theorists disagree about what counts as “mind” and “matter”. Nearly all Marxists, and some structuralists and poststructuralists, consider themselves to be materialists. This might seem paradoxical, since poststructuralist theories often focus on the language model as the determining level of social life, and language seems to be a question of “mind”. However, many structuralists and poststructuralists maintain that the structure of language is objective and material. Linguistic determinism might be “materialist” because the structure of language, rather than individual will, is the decisive element. Belief in an element of the textual field which is irreducible to conscious belief or intent (such as the unconscious, the Lacanian Real, or Derridean ambiguity) is also sometimes taken to constitute materialism. To complicate things further, poststructuralists tend to refer to anyone they disagree with as an “essentialist”, and Marxists tend to refer to anyone they disagree with as an “idealist”. Bhabha's Marxist critics consider him an idealist, and Bhabha considers Marxism to be economically essentialist or reductionist.

Opponents of poststructuralism (which is also known as postmodernism) often accuse it of talking nonsense. It uses trendy buzz-words with no real meaning or scientific validity. It rejects all ideas of truth, reality and meaning. It is 'obscurantist' – meaning that it deliberately makes simple things obscure and hard to understand. In fact, many of the early poststructuralists had a relatively precise – if hard to understand – vocabulary. Most of Foucault's work is written in quite straightforward language. Baudrillard's early works read like other neo-Marxist and Situationist works of the period (though his later works become increasingly obscure). Deleuze and Guattari multiply concepts which they insist are not metaphorical, and which they claim create different categories through which to see things. These concepts are fairly precise, even if they are not necessarily defined or easy to understand. Lacan engaged in charismatic performance and word-play, but beneath it, there is a precise theory based on clinical case-studies. Derrida goes furthest in subverting and playing with language – but he does this in works focused on the origins and meanings of words. And he also relies on literal meanings and precision when he needs to. For example, in his debate with Jean-Luc Marion, Derrida accuses Marion of breaking the rules of phenomenology. Marion calls himself a phenomenologist, but for Derrida, this makes the word meaningless (Derrida et al., 1999). However, English-speaking writers who have copied poststructuralist ideas and aesthetics on a mass scale have often used them in a simplified way – much as orthodox Marxists use Marxism in a simplified way. It is from the worst cases of such simplified, half-baked use, as well as bad-faith straw-man arguments by critics, that the accusations of 'fashionable nonsense' and 'obscurantism' get their force.

In 'Laughing Stock', Bhabha responds to the Sokal Hoax with reference to the general effects of hoaxes and scares. The latter are exemplified by social panics such as the BSE scare (about possible brain damage from eating beef from cows infected with BSE, or 'Mad Cow Disease') and the Millennium Bug (an ill-founded panic about possible computer problems due to setting of the internal clock to the year 2000). He argues that both hoaxes and scares are effective because they disturb and distort the appearance of rationality (LS, 15). In other words, hoaxes and scares happen because of the basic ambiguity Bhabha always writes about! (See below, Chapter 5, on ambiguity).

For Bhabha, however, the Sokal Hoax is based on a fallacy. No 'postmodernists', himself included, actually state that there is no such thing as the external world (LS, 16). Indeed, Bhabha has not said this – although he does seem to reduce the social world to linguistic structures. As usual when faced with opponents, Bhabha resorts to psychoanalytic rhetoric. Sokal's 'real desire' was to be found out. His hoax was motivated by 'displaced anxiety' about scientific autonomy and certainty (LS, 16). In other words, Sokal, who strongly argues for science, unconsciously realises that scientific authority is inadequate and ambivalent. Unable to recognise this inner anxiety, Sokal projects it onto postmodern and social constructivist critics. This is a very strange way to read an attack on postmodernism! It's pretty clearly a symptomatic reading in Althusser's sense (see above, 94).

For Bhabha, the hoax shows a problem with science, not with postmodernism. Scares such as the BSE scare similarly show the 'risky' place of science in the social world. Scientific failure – for instance, to predict danger – leads to a loss of faith in science. This loss of faith leads to something like Ulrich Beck's 'risk society' – a society focused on the avoidance and distribution of socially-caused risks. Risk society undermines local forms of power. It encourages atomised systems of mass-scale regulation of individuals (LS, 132). This response is counterproductive. It disperses power and responsibility, and encourages New Right cost-benefit analysis. This in turn encourages the kind of

'organised irresponsibility' which causes situations like the BSE scare (LS, 132). Bhabha's answer to the situation is 'disorganised responsibility' – in effect, a general adoption of Derridean other-centric ethics (LS, 132). In other words, he suggests that an ethical or cultural response will overcome the problems in neoliberal capitalism.



Bhabha does not need to straw-man Sokal in order to knock down his position. Sokal's argument is often crude. The constructivist rejection of realism does not entail the claim that 'everything which exists is language'. Works written in poststructuralist jargon are not necessarily nonsensical or lacking in content. The use of complex, difficult language is not necessarily a sign of talking nonsense. (Scientific language is also difficult). As mentioned already, hoaxing also afflicts reputable sciences. This said, there seems a certain amount of bad faith in Bhabha's response. While he never says the external world does not exist, Bhabha often gives the impression that he believes there is no external world, by reducing outer phenomena to inner psychological ones, by applying psychological categories to outer phenomena, and by suggesting that outer reality is constitutively split between incommensurable (irreducibly antagonistic) positions. This impression is strengthened because the root of the constitutive split in reality is psychological. It is a fact about identity-formation. The language model is basically determinate of the social world in Bhabha's writings, and this varies only subtly from the idea that everything is language. And given the obscurity of Bhabha's style, one can hardly expect readers to pick up such nuances.

In Lacanian theory, 'reality' is a secondary effect of symbolic (mainly linguistic) constructions. The Real is a separate dimension, somewhat closer to the idea of an outer reality. But it is conceived mainly in psychological terms, as an indivisible remnant of unassimilable material generated by the constitutively split nature of subject-formation. None of this necessarily entails that outer reality does not exist. However, it implies that outer reality is either inaccessible, or irrelevant to social theory. In practice, theorists continue to write *as if* there is no outer reality – which may be why misguided critiques like Sokal's keep appearing. Opponents argue that this view involves an exaggeration of the role of language. It implies that people can will things into existence through an appropriately crafted linguistic discourse (Sum and Jessop, 2003). It is not clear whether theorists such as Bhabha actually intend this implication, but it is clear that critics will continue to infer it.

Subjectivity and Standpoints

The idea of 'the subject' is commonly used in critical theory. It roughly corresponds to ideas of the individual or the person in everyday language (and analytical philosophy). It has various connotations. A 'subject' sometimes means a type of creature which has a unique, individual consciousness or memory. A regular person is a 'subject' because they have a distinct sense of themselves as a person with a continuous memory of their life. It can also mean someone or something that acts – an agent, particularly a self-determined or free-willed agent. A person is a 'subject' because they have free will and agency. The 'subject' acts on other things outside itself, leading to a dualism of 'subject' and 'object'. In grammar, the 'subject' is the noun which acts on the 'object'. For example, in the phrase 'the child threw a ball', the child is the subject of the sentence and the ball is the object. 'Subject' can also have implications of 'subjection', as in the idea of a 'subject' of the King or Queen, people 'subject' to a law, or being 'subjected' to torture.



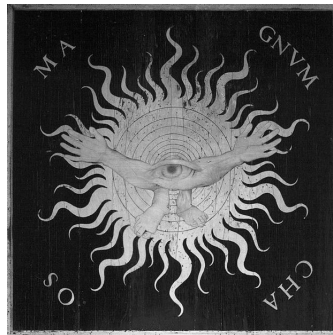
In everyday terms, a 'subject' is someone who shapes their own destiny. If someone thinks of her/himself as socially successful or unsuccessful because of good or bad choices, s/he thinks of her/himself as a subject. If someone thinks they're free to assess, endorse or reject the values of their society or culture, based on their own reason, they're thinking of themselves as a subject. Certain strands of poststructuralist theory maintain that this sense of who we are is an illusion. As well as individuals, collective groups and categories might be thought of as subjects. For example, postcolonial theorists suggest that the west sees itself as the 'subject of history' – meaning that the west thinks that it acts in history without being determined by anything outside itself. Marxists talk about classes as 'subjects'. Corporations are 'subjects' when they sign contracts. Parliaments are 'subjects' when they enact laws. Critical theorists will often talk in phrases like 'Man is viewed as the subject of History' or 'the proletariat is the revolutionary subject'. Oppressed groups might be denied 'subjectivity' or not recognised as 'subjects' – meaning they aren't seen as having agency. Some writers take denial of 'subjectivity' as tantamount to dehumanisation.

Bhabha's critique of the subject is based on the earlier critiques made in France by authors like Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Althusser, and Deleuze/Guattari. These critiques mainly criticise the idea of the autonomous subject which was previously prevalent in French

philosophy. According to this earlier conception, subjectivity is a kind of special inner essence which is independent of the world. Cartesian and Kantian subjects (i.e. those theorised by Descartes and Kant) are assumed to be 'autonomous', or self-directing. They are not reducible to anything outside themselves. They can act freely, by making their own choices. In Descartes, the most important distinction is the one between thought and extension (i.e. experience, action, etc). Thought is radically independent of extension. What people think is independent of the things people perceive or do. In Kant, the important distinction is the one between autonomy and heteronomy. People are autonomous when they act on moral principles deduced by reason. They are heteronomous when they respond to outer, worldly stimuli and desires. Descartes and Kant think people should identify with the autonomous, rational self and not the bodily, heteronomous self.

For these thinkers, the 'knowing subject' exists independently from experience. We can know that we think, and deduce some basic facts from this, without referring to experience or social life. The investigations of 'reason' occur in a transcendental space which is untouched by experience, desire, affect (emotion), and the senses. This idea is similar to, but distinct from, the earlier religious idea of the 'soul' – especially the gnostic and Puritan versions where the soul is made of a different substance from the body. Liberal theories such as those of Locke and Rawls are also founded on an autonomous subject. For instance, rational subjects might be imagined to have come together in a social contract which provides the basis for social norms. This idea of the subject also influenced phenomenology and existentialism, which were very influential in France before poststructuralism. Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre believe that 'existence precedes essence'. People self-define who they are, and have the freedom and responsibility to choose an identity and a path through life. Fanon was also an existentialist.

Structuralists and poststructuralists generally argue that 'the subject' does not really exist at all. It is an effect of language which is misperceived as something which really exists. In particular, it arises from the subject-object construction in grammar, and the use of pronouns like "I" and "you". The idea that we're separate individuals who make choices based on inner reasons seems obvious – but it's really a social construct. Outer social forces tell people to see themselves as subjects, and as a result, people imagine they are really subjects. Some writers describe poststructuralism as the 'death of the subject'.



So what are we, if we aren't subjects? There's a range of answers to this question. Each person might actually be an undifferentiated bundle of processes and traits, which aren't really held together all that well. Or, they might really be effects of determining forces outside them, and not really have autonomy. There might just be an impersonal, holistic process in which people are just local nodes – like different computers connected to the Internet. A river might look like an independent thing, when in fact it's an effect of the laws of physics and chemistry. Maybe humans are like this. Or, there might be a dominant social system which assigns everyone roles, and people's sense of who they are just reflects their role. A computer might be programmed to think it's thinking freely when in fact it's following a program. Maybe humans are like that.

Structuralism and poststructuralism often play with these various ideas, combining them in different ways. Their focus is usually on criticising the idea of 'the subject', rather than

providing an alternative. One of the effects of questioning 'the subject' is that it is a kind of questioning which reflects back on the critic who asks the questions. An author is just a particular type of subject. If the subject doesn't exist, then the author who writes that the subject doesn't exist, also doesn't exist. If one says that people are really local effects of a holistic flow or bundles or forces or social roles, one claims to have knowledge. This means that one is a 'knowing subject' – and so this restores the 'subject' which the content of the claim eliminates. So poststructuralists often get caught up in the complication and collapse of language which follows from the 'death of the subject', rather than specifying what exists instead. Some of them think that they *can't* specify what exists instead, because this also restores the 'knowing subject'. Or perhaps, we can't *realise* what exists instead because we're still too invested in the illusion that we're 'subjects'.



Subjectivity can also be thought of in terms of subject-positions, originally theorised by Laclau and Mouffe (see below, 722-7). These are the different identities or roles into which people are classified, particularly, race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality and the like. They are particularly important if 'the subject', in an individual sense, does not exist. If an author follows the alternative path of seeing people as effects of social roles, subject-positions are not just properties of individuals or ways of classifying people. They exist prior to people's 'subjectivity' and define what they are. People are seen, in effect, as aggregates of different roles and identities. This fits well with the assumption that interpellations always work. In common with many English-speaking poststructuralists (but not most of the founders of poststructuralism), Bhabha attaches particular importance to subject-positions. The term *positionality* is also often used to refer to someone's social position in terms of these categories. A positionality is the same thing as a subject-position. In Bhabha's theory, subject-positions are crucial points at which people are articulated or interpellated into the system of social constructions – the social text.

'Writing' or 'text' has a broad meaning Bhabha takes from Derrida. All forms of social action are in a sense forms of writing. There are no subjects prior to writing. Subjects are constituted through writing. For this reason, subjects are never self-present or transparent (SPD, 366). These are Derridean terms meaning that subjects don't exist in themselves. They exist in terms of the binaries within which they are constructed. However, the process of construction is always unfinished because writing is ongoing. Meaning is deferred because something else can always be added to it. Writing creates new, dialogical relationships among different elements (SPD, 366). Binaries are ways to build an appearance of total or universal knowledge or meaning (OF, 186). They leave one 'never free', since the terms of the binary are decisive (PN3, 80). They can be subverted from marginal positions.

However, the point is not necessarily to destroy knowledge entirely. Rather, it is to bring people or issues which were formerly marginalised into a 'regime of recognition'. In Bhabha's terms, this makes theory 'empowerment', instead of 'exemplification'. This means that Bhabha rejects the criticism that his theory does not fit the facts. "The question... comes up again and again... "you know, we were working with your theory, and then we looked at a book, an example, and it somehow didn't fit." And I said, "Well exactly! How boring would it be if it did?!"... I am not interested in codifying what has already been named. I am interested in trying to name what has not been named!" (DH, n.p.). The process of naming what has not been named in fact *expands* the field of knowledge. Yet it does so in a way which resists accountability to the evidential base of knowledge. Bhabha makes sweeping general claims (see below, 251-8, 264-8) which, unsurprisingly, students apply to other texts. These claims are not true on a general level. But this, apparently, is too 'boring' for Bhabha. It does not falsify his general theories, because they are about 'empowerment', not examples. If Bhabha only wanted to name the unnamed, then perhaps he should have been more careful to avoid sweeping, absolute language.



In one passage, Bhabha seeks to identify his critique of knowledge with the tradition of the humanities, in contrast with the sciences. He dislikes sciences because of their focus on 'classification and ordering', proof and quantification. Humanities, he claims, instead search for 'veracity'. This is 'a type of truth that is attributive and agential (not instrumental)'. It is, roughly speaking, qualitative or interpretive knowledge. Veracity is realised through metaphors, figures and meanings – *poiesis* or creation. Instead of classification, it is interested in translation and interpretation (ODD, 10). Bhabha thus identifies his specific concern with voice and power (and his hostility to reality-checking his claims) with the wider, qualitative nature of inquiry in the humanities. Bhabha here downplays the difference between his own focus on *disrupting* knowledge and the older idea of qualitative knowledge. He also ignores the relationship between the humanities and the unconscious (which is very different from the question of voice).

Nothing can socially construct itself. Everything is produced through a self-other relation. We have seen above (Chapter 2) how this assumption of co-constitutivity follows from a structuralist model of language. Bhabha extends this view to the entirety of social life. He thinks that everything, or at least everything representable, is 'articulatory' – it is produced through discursive articulations (LC, 223). It is rather unclear whether this means that anything is possible, provided it is 'written' in the social text. (This is a common accusation

made by Marxist critics; see below, 890-907). At one point, Bhabha is asked in an interview whether he believes there are any limits to the political effectiveness of writing. He basically refuses to give an answer (see SPD, 365-6). His vision of how construction works is similar to cybernetics (see below, 659-72). He suggests that influence is a network rather than a linear question. But he also suggests that it is a 'problem solving exercise... an intervention in your own thought or the thought of others'. It is not a 'stream of thought' (MGM, 161-2). This is similar to the Deleuzian ideas of thought as rhizome. But it also suggests a functionalist way of relating to ideas as strategic, operational resources - of interest only as means to one's ends. Someone else's thought is relevant to one's own, only if it speaks to the same problems one is already posing. This explains why Bhabha attaches such strategic importance to 'interruption' (see below, 212-19). But it also creates a conservative barrier to the influence of new theories which pose new problems. As we shall see (below, 814-17), it means that Bhabha does not feel a standard academic obligation to engage with critics or criticisms.

However, he also suggests that social categories are not simply linguistic categories. For Bhabha, all of these categories are also 'produced performatively'. This means that they do not exist as objective, external structures. They only exist in and through the ways people practice them or act towards them (LC, 2). Like Laclau and Mouffe, Bhabha argues that subject-positions can be either antagonistic (arranged in conflictual pairs, such as ingroup-outgroup) or affiliative (arranged in series, such as the different regions of a state) (LC, 2). These lead to different kinds of arrangements of concepts, and thus of people. In practice, though, Bhabha nearly always talks about antagonistic subject-positions. Bhabha sometimes also treats affect (emotion) as distinct from reason. However, he usually talks about affect as something which is itself linguistic. Affect can be and is spoken in a language of 'metaphor and the body' (LC, 192); the body is a 'sign' (LC, 211); Bhabha himself can move 'from the body of the king... to the body of the sipahi' (LC, 210), as if speaking of them directly, rather than, through language. Hence, Bhabha writes as if subjective experience can be communicated – but not through direct, literal language. He

confuses indirect representation with non-representation. The body and affect as sites *outside* language are paradoxically both affirmed and denied. In one passage, he also suggests that experience is the *only* possible basis for knowledge. 'I have only been to Mainland China once, how can I answer the question?' (MGM, 179).



Positionalities – and especially racial and colonial positionalities (e.g. black, white, Indian, English, colonised, coloniser) – are central to Bhabha's account. They provide the crucial nodes connecting the social text to the formation of personal identity, and hence to psychoanalytic phenomena such as affect. According to Bhabha, people inherit a sense of their identity from tradition. For instance, people's sense of what gender means is usually created in childhood, and national, ethnic, and religious identities come from particular histories of action and interpretation. Tradition always comes from the past. It provides a partial identity. It also introduces a past element into subjectivity which is 'incommensurable' with (i.e. absolutely, irreducibly different from) the present (LC, 2). This supposedly basic incompleteness of language creates possibilities for resistance. Gyan Prakash – a fan of Bhabha's – argues that colonialism is always, necessarily disrupted, because of the nature of language. There is always an ambivalent space within the colonial text. Critical writing opens this ambivalent space; it does not simply register it

(Parry, 2004:60; Prakash, 1992:16-17). The point of theory is to disrupt modernity. It is not to create an other (e.g. black nationalism, anti-imperialism) in itself. And the place which subverts modern identity which also provides the guarantee against capture by global capitalism (LC, 241). It is able to do this because it articulates a different enunciative site - rather than simply a content which is moved between places.

The model of identity-formation adopted here is based on those of Lacan, Derrida, Althusser and Levinas (see above, 88-96). Identity is always a result of a process of identifying with and through otherness, or through an object which is 'other' (TS, 211). There are thus 'contradictions and ambivalences that constitute the very structure of human subjectivity' and all cultural representations (LC, 19). No subject can have an essential identity, because every subject is constitutively split. It consists both of itself and its other. Identity is not a secure place from which to speak. It is an effect of social construction. An identity is forced to speak in certain ways (Byrne, 2009:64). Bhabha, and others using this approach, can exemplify it in readings of texts and events. However, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to test, verify, or falsify. Belief in constitutive ambivalence is a kind of ungrounded metaphysical commitment. It is one way of reading things, but it isn't *proven* to be true. Indeed, the content of the claim seems to preclude its being provable, since it means that *nothing* is provable. Yet it functions as a fixed point, a "trunk", in Bhabha's discourse. It functions *as if* it is proven and certain. This basically asserted ontological ground is often disguised beneath rhetorical difficulty and accusations that others are missing, disavowing or denying something.

Self and other are thus *co-constitutive* – they come into existence together, at the same time, and they mutually imply one another. They arise at the point where linguistic categories are separated. Because the other is co-constitutive with the self, it is never simply outside and unknown. It is present in the formation of the conceptual boundary between self and

other. One's boundary never only faces outward. It always also faces inward, into the inbetween space through which self and other are constituted (SPD, 381). This is why language is always *ambivalent* or *ambiguous*. It separates a self from an other which is always also part of it, in its self-definition.

This means that self and other are mutually implicated and almost smotheringly close. Difference in the broader sense of unknown otherness separate from the self is denied. Hence, Bhabha's celebration of multiple forms of culture is not at all an 'autonomous, individualist pluralism' or a 'flowering of individual talents and capabilities'. Bhabha associates such ideas with 'diversity' rather than 'difference' (see below, Chapter 9). Instead, it is about the juxtaposition of incommensurable (i.e. irreducibly different, irreconcilable) standpoints or positions (TS, 208). The epistemological limits of dominant categories are also the site where marginalised groups can exercise voice (LC, 4-5). There is a certain fetishising of failure and negativity involved in this approach. For instance, Bhabha argues that knowledge should be 'knowledge-through-error' (MM, 458). Presumably, error connects us to the ambivalence of language, which always fails to create self-presence (c.f. below, 331-46). Indeed, since knowledge is oppression, failure is desirable. Bhabha declares supplementarity to be 'the enemy of the implicit generalization of knowledge' (LC, 163). The point is to frustrate (or at least disperse) knowledge, not to produce it.

Self and other are not just socially constructed. They are mutually co-constituted and interlinked. At the same time, they are incommensurable, absolutely different. This is because the other is created through constitutive exclusion. On a Lacanian/Derridean reading, the self always has a constitutive other. Hence, the colonised can be read as the site of this internal otherness of the coloniser. Bhabha, indeed, puts forward this view (LC, 44). This position means that the other can be incommensurable, without thereby being separate from the self. Every process of identity-formation has a split inside it. It is

a split between generality and its instances or repetitions, which always differ. It is this split which makes the process of identity-formation 'performative' (LC, 247). The root of identity is *extimité* (LC, 207). In Lacanian theory, an 'extimate' object is at once outside and inside. It is radically other than the subject, but also excessively intimate or close (see below, 326-30). It is Lacan's term for the inner shadow, which is felt to be outside because it is radically other, and yet is inescapable because it is part of oneself.

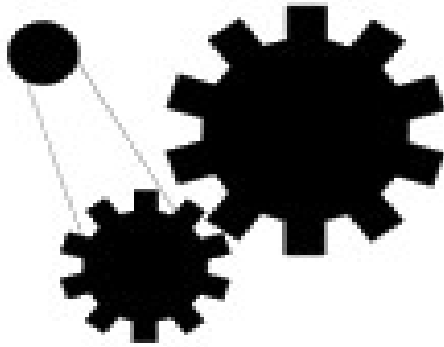


The process of producing identity is ambivalent. Not only is the object of identification ambivalent, but also, the agent of identification – the person who identifies as an individual, a member of a nation or class, and so on – is always engaged in projection, displacement or substitution (LC, 162). Identification is never a direct, empirical or sociological question of designation. It does not just mean pointing at something and saying 'that's a human' or 'that person is white'. It involves unconscious processes familiar from psychoanalysis. Identity always involves its other. To be true to a self is also to be 'a little untrue' or 'out-of-joint' (LC, 137). This out-of-joint aspect of the self is not only its internal unconscious, as in Freud. It has to do with the self's requirement of an 'other', and the resultant ambivalence of identity.

Bhabha's rejection of the idea of an individual subject leads to a strongly anti-individualist position. The subject is an effect of 'its own splitting' – in other words, of the dynamics of the speech-act. The intersubjective position exists before the subject, and constitutes it. Individual freedom is impossible. People are always in a position of relation to the other through the medium of *che vuoi* (LC, 185; see above, 91-4, 120-1). This means that all speech is strategic, negotiated, calculating (LC, 185) – a rather cynical view of language. While subjectification provides an illusion of depth, its real basis is instead a process of doubling (LC, 50). Doubling involves the duality between a real self and an image of a self, both of which are 'selves'. This means that the self is internally split, as well as being separated from the other. The co-constitutive field stains the clear waters of causality (LC, 200). This is as important as constructivism. Hence, Bhabha accuses Bakhtin of 'disavowal' for disagreeing with the Lacanian view of subjectivity (LC, 188). Constructivism without the *che vuoi* theory is taken to be both false and insufficiently radical. Furthermore, for Bhabha, the place of subject-formation is also the place where radical action can occur (see below, Chapter 5). He thus rejects approaches (like Wittgenstein's) which leave the unspeakable unspoken. It is by bringing the unspeakable into language – and subverting language – that Bhabha thinks some kind of progressive change is possible.

Bhabha thinks co-constitution and positionality are both prior to individuality. Subjectivity is a process of emergence through alterity, i.e. through the self-other relation (ONO, 10-11). 'It is only after signifying structures of intersubjective dialogue are established at the level of institutional and ideological anonymity that [individuals] *belatedly* assume identities in a contingent, open-ended conversation... "[S]ubject positions" *precede* expressive subjectivities' (ONO, 11). In other words, Bhabha thinks people are situated in binary language structures *before* they develop a sense of themselves as individuals or as having an inner life. People belong to positionalities – such as race, class and gender – *before* they exist as unique individuals. The basic level of subject-formation is 'depersonalised' (ONO,

11). Bhabha adds that 'the singularity of the actor, the “who” of personal experience and unique expression – as distinct from the “what” of public projection and attribution', is revealed in the ambivalence of speech-acts and actions (ONO, 17). He thus suggests that inbetweenness, in contrast with fixed meanings, creates space for individual self-expression. The unique individual is a secondary effect of positionality, yet still exists in a certain sense.



The word 'strategy' occurs a lot in Bhabha's work, and its meaning is not clear. It has connotations of narrative strategy – the use of particular narrative techniques to achieve a goal. But it also has implications of military or political thought. Are strategies conscious or unconscious? The question is almost moot, since subjects don't really exist. And strategies are not necessarily attributed to individuals. They are attributed to subject-positions and desires. For example, there can be a 'strategy of colonial desire' (LC, 62) and of 'colonial power' (LC, 77), a 'cunning of modernity' (LC, 175), a subjectless 'demand to modernize' which 'compulsively' insists and has a 'desire' of its own (LC, 244), and 'complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of “the people” or “the nation”' (LC, 140). In the case of the “people” or “nation”, Bhabha never specifies *whose* strategy the discourse is (since the people/nation is its effect, not its cause). But in colonialism, there is a root “desire” at work. Bhabha thus seems to hunt for unconscious positionalities hiding behind illusory self-present individuals. Beneath the surface appearance of distinct beings, a war of Platonic forms, Barthesian

myths or Stirnerian spooks is being waged. 'Whiteness', 'blackness', 'colonial desire', 'the modern subject', 'the minority standpoint' have their stratagems which flow through us, as subjects of enunciation. They flow through our emotions and identities, as much as our beliefs and statements. And we are to be judged by the strategies of these invisible entities which act through us, not our intent.

In some passages, however, Bhabha suggests that the strategies work consciously. Colonised people 'began to deconstruct [the ideas of Eurocentrism] because [they] realized how problematic and shallow western claims to freedom, sovereignty and liberalism were' (MGM, 163). Colonisers became bigoted 'because they had to defend their colonial rule' which is 'indefensible'. In contrast, the colonised 'had no option but to extend their vision' (MGM, 173-4). Positionalities forced people to adopt particular strategies. The words "realised" and "expand" implies a correct perception. Bhabha believes colonised peoples saw the true emptiness of European ideas - even though they were only seeing the "colonial" half of the picture. Bhabha's own work would then be a continuation of these strategies of resistance. It is not clear, however, that all colonised people extended their vision, or that the resultant perspectives are accurate.

While poststructuralism sees such doubling as inherent to signification – in Lacan's mirror stage, for example – Bhabha sees it as specifically colonial (LC, 50). The other is the structurally necessary negation of identity. It introduces difference-production and therefore language, symbolism and history (LC, 52). This process is always exterior and social. There is no deep self in structuralist theory, or in Bhabha. The unconscious exists, but it is exteriorised in language. In other words, the unconscious can be read-off from "behaviour" or social patterns in much the same way that unintended motives are inferred in behaviourism or cybernetics. In a Lacanian approach, alienation is not simply an aspect of capitalist society, to be overthrown or overcome through disalienation. Rather, it is constitutive and necessary. Without it, subjectivity could not exist. Worse – any attempt to eliminate it is dangerous, even totalitarian. It denies human nature, so to speak. However,

this is a mistaken way to phrase it. 'Humanity' does not really exist. Neither do individuals, groups (such as nations or classes), identities or cultures. What really exists is text. Text is constantly produced through metaphorical slippage. The 'human', 'individual', 'nation' and so on are effects of this process.



Bhabha's critique of subjectivity as a socially constructed effect dependent on co-constitutive 'others' leads to a desire to disrupt experiences of selfhood. One is to stop thinking of oneself as a distinct, autonomous subject, present to itself. Experiences of transparent immediacy and transcendent becoming are rejected, in favour of experiences of disjunction (LC, 241). The idea of 'Man' is particularly dubious. It is necessarily racialised (LC, 237). We are to undermine the 'immediacy and autonomy of self-consciousness'. Since 'the subject' is taken to be an effect of modern reason (see above, 32-3 and Chapter 2), this unlearning of subjectivity also undermines modernity and colonialism. However, it must be left an 'open question' how 'we are to rethink ourselves' after this rejection of modern subjectivity (LC, 65). Presumably, any alternative 'we' offer today will still come from inside the modern subjectivity it seeks to transcend. Bhabha does not, therefore, provide any explicit alternative to the current view of the subject. His implicit view seems, however, to be based on the Lacanian notion of self-repeating drive. We are to accept that doubling and alienation are constitutive, and repeat this process knowingly, without denying it.

Anti-colonial strategies seek to disrupt experiences of identity and subjectivity. However, the effects of this process are limited. Ultimately, the process of subject-formation which minority discourse supposedly disrupts is restored as a necessary goal. Revised forms of modernism, for example, require 'the linguistic investiture of the subject' and a metaphorical performance practice (LC, 241). In other words, new identities are to form on the model of the old. The only difference is that the new form will be self-avowedly contingent and strategic. Shang Anfeng asks Bhabha what role Chinese scholars should adopt. Bhabha responds that he can only give a 'superficial' answer, since he has little experience of China. But this answer also reveals the general contours of the role Bhabha assigns to scholars everywhere. Chinese scholars should 'try and communicate to [the world] the lessons of their history that they have lived through'. They should also do this in a way which is 'both very uniquely Chinese but also engages the wider humanitarian ideals that the whole world shares' (MGM, 180). Using local experiences to reinfect global narratives is the main function of intellectuals, as proposed by Bhabha.



Bhabha maintains that negativity is also necessarily part of one's relationship to others. The self-other relation is 'always ambivalent, disclosing a lack' (RF, 121). Subjects are always constructed through splitting (TT, 32). There is no subject prior to the speech act. This doesn't mean that people are not there before they speak. It means they are reconstituted each time they speak (SPD, 374). It is through the process of speech or writing that the borders between things are created (SPD, 374). This view of subjectivity is opposed to a so-called 'liberal' view in which people exist as distinct individuals. Bhabha's main objection to this position is that the liberal subject is 'always on time'. It isn't internally split or deferred (SPD, 374). It is the denial of a constant state of being out-of-

place which is objectionable about liberalism. However, Bhabha does not seek to move from the liberal subject to another type of subject - for example, 'eternal belatedness' (SPD, 375). He wants to open up the question of the subject. He opposes any attempt to find a more precise concept of the subject, because he wants to keep it open.

From this point of view, identity is always socially constructed. It is never a realisation of something prior or pre-given. Rather, identity always involves, first, the production of an image of identity and, secondly, the moulding or alteration of people to fit the image. It is also always a form of being '*for* the Other'. In other words, people identify as who/what they 'are', in order to be what the other demands or expects them to be (LC, 45). This is basically the same as Althusser's theory of interpellation and Lacan's theory of *che vuoi?* (see above, 91-4, 120-1). Interpellations can be seen not only in direct statements like Fanon's 'look, a Negro!'. The same statement is ostensibly present in microaggressions detected intuitively (you can see it in a gaze, or hear it in... a still silence'), and in aggregates such as 'statistics of educational performance' and 'immigration irregularities' (LC, 236). Every unwanted experience is a racist interpellation. There seems to be no gap here between Bhabha's *belief* that he is being interpellated, and a *fact* that he is; mistaken perception is out of the question.

Elsewhere, in theoretical works, I have outlined my objections to the Lacanian/Derridan view, most notably, that it leaves no role for pre-social desire in shaping which identities are adopted, and that it only accounts for normal/neurotic subjectivities, not for 'bad subjects' (Robinson, 2005; Robinson and Tormey, 2009a, 2010). Bhabha would dismiss the likes of Deleuze, Stirner, and post-left anarchy as naive. They are ruled-out on a basic ontological level. His perspective also denies the possibility, either of truly dialogical discourse (which is not calculating and manipulative), or of a base-level of desire which is not already social. I believe he is simply wrong on these points, and his style of theorising creates dangers for difference which he does not foresee. He turns language into an endless war which also requires an endless reaffirmation of a root ontology.

This approach to identity can have reductive effects. The self, or standpoint, is always about subject-positions (such as race and gender), never about unique individuals or the whole of humanity or nature. For Bhabha, the self must always be situated in relation to race and colonialism. Nobody should create a sense of self separately from this. It is the former colonisers who tend to do this, by believing in a homogenised postcolonial world. Instead, it is very important to mark (or declare) one's site of enunciation – for instance, as black or white, as a migrant, and so on (IIQ, 82). Refusal to adopt such conventional identities is often taken as an oppressive attempt to disguise a dominant-group perspective. As Hallward argues, Bhabha treats individuals as always 'derivative, a result' (2001:24). But what about the other aspects of life, the eccentric and idiosyncratic desires specific to each person, which do not clearly stem from any ascribed positionality? And what about the 'bad subjects' who have not been successfully interpellated?



The demand that people identify with positionalities is usually articulated in relation to supposedly privileged people. However, in a conversation with the Indian artist Jitish Kallat, Bhabha also uses it to criticise other subaltern people's identities. Kallat is more postmodernist, or maybe Deleuzian, than Bhabha. Many of his works are kaleidoscopic, abundant or excessive images of hybridity in his native Mumbai. Others display political speeches in text, in unlikely forms or places. He seeks to subvert representation and abstraction through spatial images which do not recognise borders (Ellis, 2008). Some of Kallat's works reference political events (like the Gujarat pogroms or the 9/11 attacks), but he does not engage in politics of positionality. Instead, he portrays himself as a 'shape-shifting cloud' (PN3, 84). 'I'm often uncertain about the actual location of the "political"', says Kallat; '[r]ather than over-deliberate about the posture I'm taking, or the firmness of my stance, I might as well engage with the multitude of signs that travel on tiny splinters of the everyday, at once festooning and polluting our worldview' (PN3, 85).

Bhabha dislikes Kallat's self-positioning as part of a globalised, network world of connections above and below ground. He thinks this view 'makes the nation obsolete, and hence irrelevant'. However, Bhabha believes the national 'space' or scale is still a determinate, decisive space (PN3, 69). The nation is 'a repetition-compulsion that we cannot simply overcome', 'globalization notwithstanding' (PN3, 70). It persists both as a defensive reaction to social collapse and a site of imagined community. Because of colonialism, India was already 'quasi-internationalist' before it was national. Anti-colonial nationalism involves a cosmopolitan, internationalist aspiration (PN3, 70). Bhabha thus partially rehabilitates the idea of the nation, even though he rejects nationalist ideology. He denies that this insistence on national identification is essentialising, as Kallat implicitly suggests (PN3, 69). One might suggest here that Bhabha cannot overcome the repetition-compulsion, but maybe others can.

As Kallat continues to resist Bhabha's latent trunks (see below, 251-8, 264-8), Bhabha becomes increasingly frustrated. 'Jitish, I don't get it. In what sense are the global or the international "dissolved categories"?... [Y]ou are now in danger of a kind of artistic evaporation!' (PN3, 82). He attacks Kallat for (in his view) misunderstanding questions about the practice and positionality' of his artwork as 'restrictive demands for the categorization or classification of the persona of the artist' (PN3, 84). He terms Kallat's approach 'a turning away from politics' and also from 'aesthetics and ethics', and accuses the artist of manipulating 'metaphor and trope' in the interests of 'mawkish evasiveness' (PN3, 84). As another contributor adds, Bhabha's insistence on positionality also involves a demand for a particular agential role, a role which Kallat implicitly refuses (PN3, 85). It is not clear how Bhabha is distinguishing the positionality of a practice and a person, a distinction he does not make elsewhere. (He later rephrases it in the more familiar distinction between 'positionality', or structural position, and 'intentionality', or authorial intent [PN3, 85]). However, what is generally clear is that Kallat has deviated from Bhabha's imperative to keep positionality in place as a 'trunk' or point of fixed meaning in artistic practice. It is also revealing how aggressive and hostile Bhabha's critique gets, when his initial demands are rebuffed. Kallat does not turn away from politics; many of his works are explicitly political. However, he turns away from the particular *type* of politics, ethics and aesthetics which Bhabha articulates. At this point, Bhabha mutates into a standard authority-figure laying down the law to a wayward deviant, describing Kallat's deviations from Bhabha's doctrine in a manner suggestive of a violated orthodoxy. Kallat refuses to be accountable to the law (perhaps a psychoanalytic law-of-the-father) laid down by Bhabha, and Bhabha responds by punishing him. He does not seem to realise that what seems to him to be descriptive self-situating can feel smothering and interpellating to others, or that other philosophical assumptions lead to other conclusions about the politics of art. Kallat is a bad subject who refuses the interpellations Bhabha accepts, and all Bhabha can do about this is to heap on anathemas and opprobrium.

Alternative approaches might suggest that Bhabha reproduces colonial oppression in his insistence on identity. Stirner, for instance, would understand subject-positions as socially-imposed 'spooks' which subordinate each person's individuality. And if people are effects of identities, the reassertion of colonialism actually reproduces it. Belief in a post-racial world should *lead to* a post-racial world. If it doesn't, then there's something wrong with Bhabha's root assumptions. Bhabha also assumes that the self is the same as the ego. There is no space in his theory for flows of desire which are not reducible to the ego (which in Bhabha's use of the term, encompasses the Freudian id, and Deleuzian desire). There is also no room for a 'higher' or 'deeper' self as in Jung, and many wisdom traditions. This is, in my view, an important limit, which generates authoritarian and conservative effects.

In some ways, Bhabha's conception of identity is Derridean. For Bhabha, subjectivity – our ability to act, our identity, and our sense of ourselves as actors – is an effect of language. The self, or 'subject', is necessarily constructed as a linguistic category through its distinction from its 'other'. One of the central aspects of Derridean theory is that binaries are mutually constituting. The two terms of a binary require one another. The split within the signifier is constitutive of human subjectivity itself. The contradiction, ambivalence and aporia of an incomplete, impossible identity are unavoidable. This leads to the phenomenon of the *supplement* (see below, 357-364).

The supplement is an important concept taken from the work of Derrida. Supplements are things which are added on. They do not pre-exist as part of a text. However, the addition of a supplement changes the meaning of a text. For example, adding an extra chapter at the end of a book might change the end of a story. Characters in superhero comics are often killed, only to be found alive or brought back to life by some later plot contrivance. Or adding a few words on the end of a sentence might change its meaning. In Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the new dictators changed the meanings of egalitarian social rules in this way. For example, “no animal shall sleep in a bed” is supplemented by “...with

sheets”, allowing the dictators to sleep in beds. In politics, supplements often arise when one concept or institution is added onto another. Ecological or socialist theory looks very different if it is enforced by a strong state or embodied in small direct action groups.



For Bhabha, this feature of language is important in social life. For instance, Bhabha sees theory and practice as articulated with and supplementary to one another (LC, 179). The addition of a practice as a way of performing a theory is similar to the way something can be added onto the end of a sentence to change its meaning (LC, 181). When a further qualifier is added, it not pre-exist the sentence. However, it is in a sense outside it, or ambivalent as to whether it is inside or outside (LC, 181). This is politically important. Resistance is supplementary, because colonised subjects add something to the colonial 'text', to what has been said. They conform, but in a way which alters the meaning of the order they conform to. This is what gives them the power to resist by altering meanings. Texts/actions are therefore ambivalent. They consist both of the supposed original meaning and a supplement added by each particular performance. This ambivalence arises even when the redeployment of a text is relatively conventional. It adds something – a different speaking subject, a different context of utterance – onto the initial statement.

Identity arises through a model Bhabha terms the 'language model'. By this, he means the view of language in Saussure, Derrida and Lacan. For example, language is taken to involve being situated as a speaking subject by the *che vuoi?* question (LC, 190; see above, 91-4, 120-1). Identity is formed at the intersection between the symbolic order and the contingency of one's own insertion in it (LC, 191). Statements occur with a time-lag which orients around a third locus, something which is neither self nor other (LC, 184). Postcolonial theory, from a postcolonial standpoint, constantly questions the 'frame' of modern thought. It confronts this frame with its 'Other', which is excluded yet constitutes it. It makes the other visible. It does this by providing a 'counter-gaze' which looks back at western selves and disrupts their disavowal of the other (LC, 46-7). This view of subjectivity has political conclusions. Politics should start from an idea of people as speaking subjects, not human beings with inherent dignity. It should embed deep assumptions of constitutive lack, alienation, and ambivalence (SS, 147-8).



Bhabha thus implies that there is a *universal*, cross-cultural structure of human psychology. This is far more essentialist than he makes out! What is more, this structure is derived from European philosophy. The *che vuoi* model assumes the universality of the Oedipus complex, which has been criticised as a colonial position (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983:169-70). In other words, Bhabha's language model imports a European view of psychology as a global absolute! If his theory is right, of course, this importation also changes the meaning of the original theory. Postcolonial theory's claim to be a distinct theory, and not just an application of poststructuralism, depends on the supplement. The same claims are taken to have new meanings or significance when repeated from a postcolonial standpoint or in a postcolonial context.

Bhabha devotes the second chapter of *The Location of Culture* to a critique of the idea that poststructuralist theory is “western” in an objectionable sense. However, he also claims that any representation of otherness *by* a western critical theorist is oppressive. 'Barthes's Japan, Kristeva's China, Derrida's Nambikwara Indians, Lyotard's Cashinahua pagans are part of this strategy of containment where the Other text is forever the exegetical horizon of difference, never the active agent of articulation' (LC, 31). European appropriations of Southern ideas are 'larceny', or theft, in contrast to Southern creativity (LC, 19), and presumably also to Southern re-uses of Northern ideas. Because the other is represented within a western theory, it loses its own power to signify. The gesture of seizing the means of value-production has not happened. But Bhabha does not bother to analyse what these poststructuralists actually say about non-western cultures. Whether they are represented positively, accurately, or progressively is irrelevant. (If, however, a western critic *agrees* with Bhabha, then it emerges that the North and South are not so far apart, that 'Cambridge [Massachusetts] is not that far from Tangiers' [LC, 269]).

What matters to Bhabha is that the other is the object of representation. 'However impeccably the content of an “other” culture may be known, however anti-ethnocentrically it is represented it is its *location* as the closure of grand theories... the good object of knowledge... that reproduces a relation of domination' (LC, 31). Hence for example, anthropology relies on a subject-object split (LC, 150). According to Bhabha, this kind of objectification reflects a particular kind of power rooted in the 'scopic drive', or pleasure in seeing (LC, 76). This drive obtains enjoyment through the capture and objectification of others. Bhabha also dislikes the 'appropriation' of Third World metaphors to describe the whole of postmodernity (LC, 238). Such metaphors are taken to downplay the subversion of modernity from its margins. He also attacks aid and development agencies, anthropology, and missionaries for transferring mere contents, not the position of power (LC, 242).



On the other hand, postcolonial theory disrupts not only the images of western thought, but the 'place' of the western subject (LC, 47), its standpoint and its ability to speak. The point is to tear down 'reason' and 'knowledge', to disrupt their functioning. For example, an experience of 'limits' might 'disrupt' the disciplinary demand of an academic field such as semiotics to list or enumerate phenomena (LC, 181). For Bhabha, this is desirable. It disrupts egos and therefore power. The point is to question modernity's discourse 'not simply "as ideas" but as the position and status of the locus of social utterance'. Only a shift in the place of enunciation to the liminal/inbetween position disrupts power. Any other cultural exchange simply shifts vocabulary while leaving the power-structure intact (LC, 242). In a recent piece, Bhabha advocates what he calls a 'mobile' and 'ambulant' (walking) way of doing theory. Such theory should cut across – and disrupt – boundaries between academic disciplines and 'discursive permanence' (ODD, 8). Theory should forego comparison and taxonomy, and instead focus on exploiting fast-moving flows (ODD, 9). The 'productive agency of circulation' is useful in freeing people from 'conceptual boundaries or institutional rigidity'. But the crucial issue is 'the problem of gravity and groundedness: *who* speaks, from *where* and under *what* conditions of authorization?' (ODD, 11).

This approach effectively reduces critical theory to power-politics among positionalities. Bhabha sometimes copies Spivak's idea of seizing the means of production of cultural value for this purpose (LC, 183, 240). Since for Bhabha all language is representational, it seems impossible that a western writer could ever treat a non-western person or group as anything but an object of representation (or vice-versa). This leads to the conclusion that, for Bhabha, what matters is *who* is speaking, and not *what* they say. The key question is not *what* the present is, but 'who defines this present from which we speak?', and what the 'demand' or 'desire' behind this speech is (LC, 244). Standpoint matters, not content. Even repeating another person's statements removes their power to speak. If Ahmed says "I don't like pizza" and Sam tells a third party "Ahmed does not like pizza" or "Ahmed says he does not like pizza", then according to Bhabha, Sam is dominating Ahmed. The claims may be logically identical at the level of the statement. But they involve a different site of enunciation. Presumably, this means the progressive thing for a privileged person to do is to shut up or abase their own place of enunciation. This is also why western theory repeated by an Indian academic is not 'western' in an objectionable sense. The conceptual potential of poststructuralism (and Marxism, and psychoanalysis) can be separated from its institutional standpoint (LC, 31-2). Bhabha does not make any attempt to justify his view that knowledgeable and anti-ethnocentric representations lead to domination. He takes it as axiomatic. But it stems logically from his view of self/other co-constitution. It seems, perversely, to lead to a certain purism: western writers cannot write about non-western cultures without practising domination. But the reverse does not seem to be the case. Bhabha frequently writes about western cultures, and about non-Indian non-western cultures. Is this, in his own terms, an act of domination? This is one of many paradoxes which follow from a theory which opposes and yet often uses antagonistic discourse (see below, 274-6).

More importantly for Bhabha's theory, language on the poststructuralist 'language model' is ambivalent. This view of language involves an assumption that meaning constantly shifts. The signifier, as described by Lacan and Derrida, 'slips'. Its relationship to its supposed object is constantly moving and changing. Articulation is always re-articulation. Whatever one says is always a reconfiguration of the existing discursive system (Kapoor, 2003). It repeats the dominant discourse. Political agency is simply the performance of this slightly differing repetition. This is a restricted type of agency. It is limited to opportunities present in the existing opportunity-structure. Agency never alters the structure of language itself.



Agency is still important, for several reasons. Firstly, it exposes the contingency and the basis in in-betweenness of all power and authority. Secondly, it gives the dominant discourse new inflections. Agency does not express something ontological or intentional. Instead, it performs or acts-out a pre-existing discourse in a differently inflected way. The subject is performative, not ontological. In other words, there is no subject prior to language, but there is a type of subjectivity which is enacted through language. The multiple, ambivalent, co-constituted nature of the subject enables action. It does not impede action. The slight reinflexion of discourses is a way of exercising agency, empowerment, resistance and transformation in conditions that seem to be objective and material (such as poverty and discrimination). It operates through gaps and inbetweenness (ONO, 13). As we shall see (below, 198-211), Bhabha believes that such agency is *always* possible. It is built into the structure of language. Material determination, domination by others, and objective limits are always illusions arising from the ego.

For Bhabha, subjectivity is itself a 'border' or marginal category. People's sense of themselves as 'subjects' (or selves, individuals, egos, identities), or as 'collective subjects' (groups and categories such as nations and classes), are effects of particular border-experiences. It is by encountering and differentiating oneself from others that one gains an identity. For example, men define themselves as men by encountering and differentiating themselves from women. Women do the same in relation to men. If a social system has more than two genders, the same thing happens but across more different binaries. Faced with later, more militant types of identity politics, Bhabha increasingly falls back on the importance of relationality as a barrier against claims to 'own' one's history or experience. 'I think you cannot simply own your own history of being oppressed, or of suffering. Of course that experience is specific. Of course it creates its own communal language and experience. It creates its own ability to construct a history. But it has to be seen in terms of relationality, a history of dynamic interactions' (RCA, 5).

The crucial point is that individual identity requires its other. As Hallward observes of Bhabha, '[s]pecific individuals are here always derivative, a result' (2001:24). Subjects are formed through the intersection of different subject-positions into which people are interpellated. Hence, subjectivity is a 'gathering of differential moments'. Each subject is multi-positional (Xie, 1996:156). They occupy several subject-positions at once. However, the experience of being a subject feels like more than just a list of positions. For Bhabha, this is not because of individual uniqueness. Rather, it's an effect of the structure of language. The experience of being a subject is always a kind of excess. It is greater than the sum of subject-positions an individual occupies – their race, class, gender, and so on (LC, 2). This is because of the possibility of supplementing existing meanings. Each of us is defined as an incarnation of the undecidability of language. Each of us is incomplete, yet at the same time undefinable by others. We end up as non-self-sufficient monads, existing alongside each other without direct contact, yet also mutually entangled in relations which define us.

Bhabha's view of agency is closely linked to the structuralist or poststructuralist view of subjectivity. This is the tradition which Bhabha picks up and articulates in his view that subjectivity is a border category. Hence, Ilan Kapoor (2003) argues that Bhabha manages to assert agency, while also endorsing poststructuralist assumptions. Poststructuralists believe that a stable, rational subject cannot exist. Subjects are always caught in social structures. They also have unconscious aspects. This often leads to a view that agency is impossible. Politics is reduced to critique. Kapoor thinks that Bhabha escapes this problem. He talks a lot about subaltern agency. For Kapoor, Bhabha allows agency because he sees it as 'possible only with subjection'. People are agents only within a pre-given discursive context. They use the discursive resources made available by the dominant discourse. Although they are effects of this discourse, they can still use its resources in novel, empowering ways.

Bhabha here finds himself needing a complex solution to a problem arising from his root assumptions. In fact, the problem of the 'subject' is a recurring problem for structuralists and poststructuralists. Structuralist theory relies on the view that we are all products of a set of positions within language. Individual agency does not really exist. A mystery thus arises: why do people experience themselves as 'subjects', as having agency or free will? And how does social change happen? Various theorists such as Lacan and Derrida sought to answer this question by theorising the subject as a complex effect of a lack or void within language. Individuals incarnate the the indeterminacy of signification itself (Hallward, 2001:24). Of course, the problem only exists if one accepts the structuralist hypothesis that people are effects of structural positions. If one accepts any of a range of rival positions (that desire or becoming exists prior to subject-positions, that people are biologically individuals with distinct drives, that people are existential or Jungian selves, that aggregates such as class have a generally determining role, that people are products of rationality, genetics, God, etc) then the problem Bhabha is solving does not exist to begin with. On the terms of his own theory, however, it is politically important.



The Postcolonial Standpoint

If Bhabha's is a liberation theory, its main thrust is to destroy people's subordination to rigid categories. The discourse of modernity is an ideology, rationalisation, or hegemony. It makes an uneven, exploitative world order seem normal (LC, 171). For Bhabha, western people (his main audience) are constructed as 'modern subjects'. This means that people believe themselves to be a particular kind of person – an atomised individual, rational, utility-maximising, powerful within history, possessed of true objective knowledge and so on. Because positionality precedes subjectivity, this is what western people actually *are* – but not entirely. This identity depends on particular constructions of an 'other' against whom this category is defined. For the modern subject to be powerful, others have to be powerless and abject. For the modern subject to be developed, others have to be underdeveloped or primitive. For western knowledge to be objectively true, other knowledges have to be declared false and superstitious.

This process of 'othering' oppresses people who are confined to the category of 'other'. It doesn't just misrepresent them as stupid, primitive, criminal and so on. It tends to actually interpellate them and *make* them stupid or primitive or criminal (though again not entirely, as there is space for resistance). Progressive politics is mainly about disrupting this process. And it is an ethical duty to the other, in a Levinasian sense, to disrupt this process. This means that western people have to be forced or persuaded to *lose* their identity as "modern subjects", so as to create space for the other. The process of destroying this identity is termed deconstruction. It also implies that 'othered' people actually *are* what racists interpellate them as. When Bhabha discusses a case of a Turkish migrant being misperceived as a 'randy dog', he insists the stereotype is 'neither simply hallucination or phobia'. Rather, the Turk becomes a 'man-dog that confronts the racist language with its own alterity, its foreignness'. This figure impedes 'the search for narcissistic love-objects' and opens up a 'void in the present' (LC, 166). For Bhabha, is by *being* the focus of racist desire, and presumably identifying with it, that a person subject to racism has subversive power. This power is primarily a power to disrupt the identity *of the privileged person* (see LC, 167), who thus remains at the political centre.

Politically, the co-constitution of self and other means that non-western 'others' are oppressed *because* the western self has constructed itself as powerful, knowledgeable, and so on. It needs to construct itself in relation to an 'other' in order to see itself as having these attributes. The western subject is founded on disavowing, or forgetting, its various exclusions – of colonised peoples, women, etc. Such disavowals undermine the liberal idea of the individual, and the universal aspirations of modernity (LC, 10). Because these ideas (for example, the 'knowing subject') are founded on exclusions, they are not truly self-present or universal. They need to be disrupted so as to free the oppressed from the interpellations which make them inferior. 'The invisible power that is invested in [the] dehistoricized figure of Man is gained at the cost of... women, natives, the colonized, the indentured and enslaved' (LC, 197). In order for black people to stop being imagined as

(and forced to be) powerless, savage and stupid, white people have to stop believing that they themselves are powerful, civilised and knowledgeable. This analysis leads to a destructive style of political engagement. It provides a lot of room for *schadenfreude* – or enjoyment of (privileged) others' suffering.



This view of subjectivity helps to situate Bhabha's view of anti-colonial practice. Hybridity can be understood as a practice which brings the disavowed other (in Lacanian terms, the Thing) to light. Bringing the other to light recognises and sublimates it. Yet this approach entails reading the colonised almost entirely as what s/he is for the coloniser. The colonised is radically other only because s/he is the coloniser's internal other; the colonised her/himself is simply part of the coloniser's psychological landscape. What the colonised is *in itself* – either as a pre-colonial culture or its remnants, or as hidden transcripts and alternative political visions – is either completely irrelevant or is just a misperception of the internal relationship of otherness. Bhabha's theory rests on the gamble that the inner shadow of white colonisers is (in a sense) *the same thing* as actual colonised people. Colonised people can resist, using the fact that they are already inside the coloniser's psychodrama. Indeed, their resistance is valuable mainly for the impact it has *on the coloniser* (see LC, 167-8) or alternatively, its effects on theory (LC, 181).

As we have seen, subject-positions are important for Bhabha. People have, or adopt, all kinds of subject-positions – as conservatives or socialists or liberals, as sports fans, as members of families and so on. However, subject-positions are not created equal. Some are more socially vital than others. Bhabha argues that postcolonial views emerge from a particular standpoint. They come from 'colonial or anticolonialist testimonies', or from the testimonies of minorities. They intervene in hegemonic, modernist discourses and disrupt the normalising force of these discourses. They also reveal the inherent ambiguities in these discourses (FBI, 46). Bhabha suggests that we can learn the most from the oppressed and displaced (LC, 172). The most important lessons for 'living and thinking' come from marginalised and dominated peoples (FBI, 47). In theorising marginality, Bhabha short-circuits between the objective and subjective. On the one hand, marginality is a 'product of the liberal State'. On the other, recognition of this co-constitutivity reveals 'the limitations of [liberal] common sense... from the perspective of minorities or the marginalized' (LC, 190). The fact of co-constitution and its experiential expression are indistinguishable.

This means that Bhabha assumes that dominated people understand domination. Their experience is (in a sense) self-present and true. Or it should be treated as such, even though it can't be – because it's the disavowed truth of the dominating group's identity. Bhabha seems to work with a model of experience arising from positionality, rather than experience being framed through "common sense", false consciousness, ideology or submersion. Subversive effects are already directly present, in everyday experiences and discourses – though they might be unconscious. Hence, the experience of marginalisation 'transforms our critical strategies' (LC, 47), and survivors of racism have 'another wisdom', different from ideas of progress (LC, 254-55). Although he sometimes contradicts this, Bhabha commonly talks as if positionalities generate single, unitary standpoints. For example, he writes: 'Minority discourse sets the act of emergence in the antagonistic *in-between* of image and sign... contests genealogies of origin... acknowledges the status of national culture – and the people – as a contentious, performative space of... perplexity'

(LC, 157). He implies that *all* minority discourse takes the same position that he does. Similarly, he talks as if colonialism has a single 'originary myth', 'desire', and resultant structure (LC, 115-16). There is a *single* colonial point of view which is repeated even when it differs. Bhabha's is a strangely essentialist anti-essentialism. While it dwells on the ambivalence and incompleteness of all discourse, it also performs a rigid certainty about the discourses and identities involved. It all too easily falls foul of complexity.



According to Bhabha, lessons for equality, democracy and justice are best learnt from the marginalised, colonised and enslaved. They are rarely learnt from colonisers (DDR, 28). This is because marginal subjects inhabit the 'inbetween' or border space (LC, 13; see Chapter 5). This includes, for example, Bhabha's own point of view. In the piece *DissemiNation*, Bhabha claims to have lived the moment of migration, or a 'scattering' which becomes a 'gathering' (LC, 139). This experience provides a basis for a new kind of radicalism. The site of the discourse seems to be more important than its content. It is because Bhabha believes that the postcolonial site is an internal contradiction of modernity that he sees it as a strategic site at which to resist power. Revealingly, it is often treated as a *singular* site. Bhabha thinks there are diverse subject-positions. The idea of a

'homogenized Other' is 'facile' (LC, 52). But Bhabha can also speak, apparently without irony, of *the* minority standpoint (LC 2). And he can, also without irony, suggest that this standpoint has 'the truest eye' (LC, 5). There is a strange contradiction between Bhabha's deconstruction of truth and pure identity (e.g. LC, 22), and his periodic assumption of it. This contradiction which will be discussed later (see below, 251-8, 264-8, 811-12).

On this basis, postcolonialism can claim both to be a distinct theory from poststructuralism, and to be more radical. Postmodernism has questioned the disjunctions and ironies of modernity. However, postcolonialism goes further in seeing European modernity as necessarily based on a colonial underside (FBI, 49). According to Bhabha, 'metropolitan histories cannot be conceived without invoking savage colonial antecedents' (CF, 63). There is a particular model of social change at work here. Newness or difference enters the world through hybridity, inbetweenness and ambiguity. Cultures of survival, among marginalised groups, take a different form from dominant culture. They tend to be less organised, more ambiguous, and more 'translational', translating between several cultures. This type of cultural production draws attention to the social construction of culture (LC, 172). It is meant to generate what Bhabha terms 'borderline affects and identifications' (CIB, 54).

Cultural change is initiated by bearers of hybrid identities, who can initiate productive instability in linguistic categories (LC, 38). People who occupy two or more positions can become incalculable and impossible to place (LC, 62). Something occupying a border position is neither of the sides of a binary. It occupies a position which is 'something else besides' (LC, 64). It can therefore spur translation between the two sides of the binary. The resultant rupture or newness is logically generated from, but not directly caused by, the binary which precedes it (IT, 114). This rupture subverts modern reason, and disrupts the resultant creation of the colonised as an irrational 'other'. The 'postcolonial perspective' disrupts modern reason. It can be seen, not only in subaltern texts, but in moments of internal disruption of European texts (LC, 195). This approach seems to

reject modern reason. However, Bhabha claims that he is not seeking to 'move beyond' rationality, but just to acknowledge that there are 'other logics' (SPD, 365). I feel he does little in practice to develop these 'other logics', and the fact that he does not see them as an *alternative* to dominant rationalities is revealing of the limits to his project. What he develops are not so much 'other logics' as ways of subverting and productively misusing dominant logics. Ultimately, he does not believe that the status quo can be overcome (see below, Chapter 15).



Bhabha's analysis leads to a particular style of reading which focuses on marginality. It also interprets marginality primarily through its expected effect of producing a border-zone. The focus of investigation should be the 'freak displacements' arising from marginal and diasporic standpoints (WH, 146). Such displacements are more fundamental than either national or human scales. For example, in Bhabha's reading of Toni Morrison (see below, 202-11), 'unspeakable thoughts' finally come to be 'spoken'. Emancipation becomes possible and thinkable. This happens when the 'victims of violence' realise they are also 'signified upon'. Violence stems from 'projected fears, anxieties and dominations'. They do not originate within the victims. They also do not fix the victims in the 'circle of pain'. The racist myth which originated violence can be expelled (WH, 151). But how is this expulsion different from what Bhabha elsewhere denounces in the politics of Noel Ignatiev (see below, 885-8)? Probably the difference is that for Bhabha it is a cultural rather than a political process. It seems that Bhabha is fine with splitting gestures so long as they remain in the field of culture, but he is uncomfortable with their passage into politics. Bhabha would, however, reject this distinction between culture and politics (see below, 151). He believes that cultural acts are directly political.

The focus of Bhabha's approach is on positionality - a person's point of view within a structurally determined range of available positions. This is meant to have a consciousness-raising effect. Hence, Shaobo Xie argues that Bhabha's work 'will shock the reader into renewed knowledge of his or her own position in history and cultural discourse' (1996:155). Xie argues that Bhabha historicises poststructuralist ideas. This is done to prevent these ideas being contained in western master narratives (1996:164). A postcolonial position seeks to create collaboration both within and across national spaces, on the basis of juxtaposition (LC, 175). Such collaboration should come from the margins of modernity, not only its internal failure (LC, 175).

However, as we shall see below (251-8, 264-8), Bhabha *does* often universalise and dehistoricise. He has an implicit metanarrative of his own, which requires that readers see themselves in terms of his own categories. These categories are often projections, and they are impervious to the empirical specificity of a reader's subjectivity or position. If someone belongs to a particular positionality (e.g. European or colonial subject), Bhabha implies that they *must* have the attachments and unconscious structures he analyses. In this, postcolonial theory often mirrors the stereotyping, rigid colonial discourses it criticises. This happens because Bhabha takes actual people to be largely the same as the categories they occupy. Also, in practice, Bhabha constructs his position mainly from colonial texts, not from oppositional voices. His posited positionality is more to do with the meaning of the colonised *for the coloniser* than with colonised people's own production of meanings.



The emphasis on positionality leads to a focus on the naming of identities. For Bhabha, recognising one's situated position is important (SPD, 387). Identities are effects of discursive subject-positions, not essences. Negatively identified subject-positions can also become sites for positive collective identities. The histories of such identities are often fragmentary, hidden or damaged (LC, 229). Like many identity theorists, Bhabha assumes that one's situation is reducible to one's macro-group and political context. He ignores the aspects of one's situation which are micro-social, some of which might not be apparent to each person themselves. For example, in a piece on masculinity, Bhabha states that he does not wish to disavow it. Instead, he wishes to 'disturb its manifest destiny' by showing its constructedness (SPD, 388). Later in the same piece, however, he argues against movements which self-identify as white males. He implies that people defined as white males should not self-identify under those terms, because they reduce someone's conditions of solidarity (SPD, 388). Hence, the implications of Bhabha's politics of positionality are contradictory.

Non-white racial identities are particularly important because they are not self-enclosed identities, but effects of a border-zone. Race is a crucial space of intertextuality (the shaping of a text by other texts). It is a point where academic disciplines come up against political classifications of difference (RH, 82). Bhabha criticises Foucault for treating racism as an archaic remnant, and Benedict Anderson for placing it outside history (RH, 83). For Bhabha, the appearances of archaism and doubling are not just present in racist discourse, but in the 'time-lag' or constitutive gap which produces the signs of race and racism (RH, 85; see below, 374 on the time-lag). Problems of race and racism actually stem from unresolved moments within the 'enunciative present' of modernity and postmodernity (RH, 85). In other words, they are not contingent remnants of something else. They are aspects of the constitutive split which always occurs in the formation of identity.

Not only Bhabha's theory is situated by its positionality. He demands that all theories be seen in those terms – particularly those which reject any such label. A theory which appears as non-racial is probably “white”. Bhabha endorses the view, common in whiteness studies, that whiteness is a place of power which is rendered invisible. He links this to Foucault's idea that the site of power is always invisible. It poses as transparent (WS, 21). However, he criticises the idea of the abolition of whiteness. Once abolished, whiteness could continue its hegemony, disguised as civility, national culture, secularism, tolerance and so on (WS, 23).



In practice, Bhabha also pioneers an approach which involves claiming to speak for the privileged other's disavowed truth. For example, in his reading of Foucault, Bhabha writes: 'At this point of self-alienation postcolonial agency returns, in a spirit of calm violence, to interrogate... What it reveals is... a truth about the symptom of Foucault's thinking... the reason for Foucault's desire to anxiously play with the folds of Western modernity' (LC, 196). In other words, Bhabha, as postcolonial reader, knows the *real reason* behind Foucault's writing, better than Foucault does. It knows the real reason because it is Foucault's, and every western person's, disavowed truth. Postcolonial reading is not simply *one of many* points of view. Bhabha presents it as a decisive, “true” point of view. Because his own view is “true”, he can accuse others of mistakes (such as “disavowal”) when they disagree with him. His grounding for this position is co-constitutivity. This type of claim is similar to, yet subtly distinct from, Lacanians' claims to speak for others' disavowed truths. In Bhabha, the content of the disavowed truth is both determinate, and already known. And the purpose of critique is not healing or “cure”, but political and epistemological subversion.

Bhabha suggests that critical theory (e.g. European poststructuralism) should be named as 'western'. It's written from a white, western point of view. It has historically 'contained' the Other (i.e. non-western cultures) as objects rather than agents in theory (LC, 31). The Other is positioned as the 'horizon of difference' rather than the 'agent of articulation'. This leaves western theorists holding the discursive power to articulate (i.e. the power to speak). 'Grand theories' such as those of Marx and Hegel are particularly criticised for establishing closure. They reduce the Other to an object to be represented, which is expected to remain a 'docile body' and a 'good object of knowledge (LC, 31), i.e. passive and subordinate. This is the case even when a theory is anti-ethnocentric (as with Sartre and Fanon). Bhabha implicitly claims that the other should be seen as a speaking subject. There should be no big theories, only articulations of small theories juxtaposed in a state of ambivalence. However, Bhabha also suggests that critical theory can be a site of ambiguity. The non-western Other reappears as a 'revisionary force'. It thus breaks with its place of 'institutional containment' and its assigned, docile role (LC, 32).



Discussing American racial politics in particular, Bhabha expresses suspicions that a black American perspective can never be recognised as universal or national. Bhabha compares this to a particular artwork in which a black seller is offering something nobody wants to buy. A black scholar's primary focus on 'race' is marked as particular (BWRAO, 17). In other words, it is seen as a focus on a particular identity. In contrast, a white person who just talks about white issues is seen as 'universal' (talking in general).



However, for Bhabha, there is universality in the black hybrid position itself. It is universal because it shows the holes in the supposedly universal white position. Every community creates difference through its 'other' (LC, 114) – the co-constitutivity discussed above. This gives minority perspectives, even when focused on particularity, a universal relevance. Bhabha responds to various critiques of African-American intellectuals. He argues that they have effectively combated racist approaches such as biological reductionism. For Bhabha, the specific issues arising from marginalised groups – colonised and enslaved peoples, and those who are classed, raced, and/or gendered (i.e. who are socially constructed in terms of class, race or gender positionalities) – are not only issues for these groups. They speak to the wider issue of how modernity is constituted by difference (TT, 82). An apparently narrow focus on a particular positionality is really a universal focus on the self-other relation and its ambiguity.

CHAPTER 3

The Place of Culture

The Place of Culture in Social Life

In principle, Bhabha recognises the whole of social life as a terrain of struggle. Indeed, Bhabha occasionally criticises the privileging of 'high' culture (LC, 172, 178). In practice, 'high' culture (such as art and literature) has a special place in his work. Bhabha rejects any distinction between politics and art or culture, or between everyday life and elite-level art. For example, he argues that the 'violence of the poetic sign' should be placed within the threat of political violence (LC, 60). He also argues against the idea of being activists *rather than* artists, or artists claiming to be political activists. He claims that this obscures the specific values of a 'politics of cultural production' (LC, 20). In other words, an artist is always already a political activist, and adds nothing by importing politics 'as such' into art. It is better to focus on the politics of 'cultural production' itself. This broader refusal to distinguish between political and other kinds of speech renders all art political. Bhabha writes mainly on culture, in a fairly limited, 'highbrow' sense – art exhibitions, erudite novels, poetry, theatre, and (more rarely) media representations and popular culture. Nearly all his examples come from the arts – and rarely from politics, social movements or everyday life. There are a few cases where Bhabha refers to political acts (such as the circulation of chapatis of indeterminate meaning prior to a revolt) and everyday incidents (such as discussions between Hindus and Christian missionaries). But these are the exception not the rule.

The conflation of culture and politics is one of the hallmarks of Bhabha's work – and one of the ways in which he reduces the importance of political activism. According to

Bhabha, a politically mature person recognises no distinction between 'theoretical' and 'activist' texts. Every text is a political intervention in its own context. There is no qualitative difference between a political text, such as a leaflet delivered on a picket, and a work of art or an academic article. Activist interventions such as a strike leaflet always contain theory, and both the leaflet and an academic article 'forms of discourse' that 'produce rather than reflect their objects of reference' (LC, 21). Hence, writing articles and books is itself 'intervening ideologically' (LC, 22). Politics is not a distinct field. The 'political subject' is itself a 'discursive element' (LC, 23), or an effect of writing and text. Bhabha seeks to 'erase' the 'popular binary' which separates theory (as totalising generality) from politics (as part of everyday life and experience) (LC, 30). Elsewhere, Bhabha states that 'the theory/practice distinction, as far as I'm concerned... never really existed' (HD, n.p.). This has been described by supporters as 'confounding the traditional oppositions between theory and politics, or theoretical and activist' (Byrne, 2009:56). In practice, however, it 'confounds' the binary only to the extent of assuming that academic writing is always already political or interventionist.



Bhabha argues that literature is directly political. It is 'a way of gathering people as a national group by addressing them through the national language' (MGM, 167). This argument is an extension of Anderson's (1991) theory of the historical role of the novel.

Literature functions politically because it 'arouses the passions'. It also contributes to the formation of a 'national canon'. This canon is used to exclude minority voices. For Bhabha, 'nationalism is often constitutive of literature departments and of the academy as a whole' (MGM, 167). Nation-centred discourse creates 'immobile' canons and perspectives. These approaches elide the minorities which are necessary supplements of the nation. In academia, nation-centrism is 'established by prioritizing linguistic authenticity, affirming cultural supremacy, and making claims to historical continuity and political progress' (ODD, 2). This argument is not entirely groundless. There are clear relationships between the emergence of national languages, national literatures, and national identity. Academic canons are often exclusionary. But Bhabha exaggerates the importance (and the homogeneity) of what, for most of its existence, has been an elite sector, in the project of constructing national identities and ideologies. Is it really viable to suggest that today's ordinary readers of mass paperbacks in genres like crime, fantasy or romance are participating in a process of national identity and canon-formation? This does not seem viable from a perspective focused on readers. Are university canons causes or effects of national identity? Bhabha assumes the former, but has little basis to do so. Crucially, Bhabha's way of posing the issue justifies his own work. The project of shifting definitions of literature in universities, or even just including more minority authors in the canon, becomes on Bhabha's definition vitally important and radical. This provides a convenient excuse for academics to focus their energies on career advancement and on shifting the canon towards their own research interests, while believing they are contributing to revolutionary social processes.

Hence, Bhabha often writes as if culture acts *directly* on politics. For example, he discusses a film about the Handsworth uprising of 1985. He claims that, in the film, '[t]he racism of statistics and documents and newspapers is interrupted by the perplexed living of Handsworth songs' (LC, 156). Bhabha writes as if the film – which has limited circulation – directly disrupts racism. But can something disrupt racism if people don't see it doing it? In another passage, Bhabha cites a piece on the guerrilla tactics of maroons – escaped

slaves living on the margins of American society. Maroons relied on rapid hit-and-run tactics, local knowledge, informants, and so on. This was a literal form of social exodus and warfare. Yet Bhabha adds: 'For "warriors" read writers or even "signs"'. He terms the maroons' activities 'strategies of signification (LC, 145). And he treats guerrilla effectiveness as an instance of his central theme of textual ambiguity. But is a guerrilla war and/or drop-out community really comparable to a textual "subversion"?



This position also extends to Bhabha's own theoretical work. He apparently believes that theory itself can bring about political change (Han, 2005:9). It does not need the mediation of political activism, popular culture, or critical pedagogy. Bhabha assumes that simply "opening a space" (i.e. producing a discourse) can create outpourings of difference. He treats discourses as bodies of power which can be broken down directly by theory. Theory does not need any mediation to affect everyday life. Disrupting the idea of the national past in art, for example, directly disrupts nationalism as a material reality (SPD, 380-1). Indeed, Bhabha even suggests that art is the *main* means to achieve social transformation. Social movements are often most 'subversive and transgressive' when they take cultural forms (LC, 20). Culture is a privileged site of political action. Bhabha tries, through his writing, to 'create' a 'time and space' of marginalised peoples (LC, 156), to

summon a particular experience through the reader's 'listening' to cultural texts.

Reading Art through Ambivalence

So how is art to be interpreted? As we shall see below, Bhabha emphasises the condition of ambivalence, ambiguity, or 'inbetweenness' (below, Chapter 5). In art, the inbetween space is disruptive of comfortable, representational aesthetics. It thus represents experiences of disjunction – and the constitutive gap within language. The image of home, and the realist style of writing, are 'unable to contain the anguish of cultural displacement and diasporic movement' (WH, 142). For Bhabha, aesthetics should play the role of rendering historical events obscure, and reconfiguring them through the third space, or time-lag (WH, 143; see below, 372-4). Bhabha thus rejects both expressive views of aesthetics and materialist critiques (WH, 144). The aestheticisation of inbetweenness is taken to have radical cultural effects. It is literally changing the world. The metropolitan (core, First) world is 'becoming minority' through migrant texts (LC, 228).

There is thus a particular aesthetic imperative in Bhabha's work. Art should perform what is unresolved, ambivalent or antagonistic. It should perform this, so as to emphasise the 'struggle for translation' (HH, 125). Bhabha thus frames translation as an alternative to transcendence (HH, 125). Resistance involves talking and writing in ways which emphasise the open, processual nature of identity and representation (Huddart, 2006:34). We need to 'ride the boundary' and recognise its double edge (BWRAO, 17). Interpretation is about free expression. But it is also about re-reading laws and traditions against the grain (WR). Bhabha believes that subaltern (feminist, black, postcolonial) works have 'at best, changed the very concept of *time* through which we construct the "literary"'. They articulate a 'systemic rather than serial, *textual* rather than teleological' view of time. (OF, 182). In other words, they have moved away from linear writing and towards writing focused on deep structures. They have moved literature towards the category of the time-lag (see below, 374), in which dominant discourses are displaced (OF, 183).



Bhabha is thus largely aligned with 'identity politics' in art. In 'Dance This Diss Around', Bhabha responds to criticisms of so-called 'victim art' – which uses trauma and suffering as the basis for its aesthetics. Right-wing critics attack this type of art as subordinating art to 'social need' and group identity. They prefer ideas of aesthetic disinterestedness and the individual spirit (DTDA, 19). However, Bhabha considers this approach to be authoritarian. He instead argues that aesthetic experience can be horizontal instead of vertical. Instead of transcending everyday life, art can insert an experience into the social field horizontally. Instead of transcendental art, Bhabha calls for art which short-circuits sublimity. It instead plugs into a 'dialogue with a community' which has an identity based on suffering (DTDA, 20; c.f. below, 915-20). In Bhabha's model, horizontal connection occurs between positionalities. It involves a kind of articulation or plugging-in. Each positionality has its own issues. For example: 'doesn't the "black" feminist critique of universalism and binarism start from a different place and address a different problematic of masculinist authority?' (OF, 186). Bhabha's response seems to be in the positive. Black feminism addresses a different kind of authority from either white feminists or black male writers. However, Bhabha's approach seems to retain the separation between artist and reader/viewer. It also places an emphasis on positionality which marginalises other focal points of creative practice. Bhabha has also been accused of prioritising race over gender (McClintock, 1995:64-5 Huddart, 2006:92), in the usual exchanges typical of positionality theory: a focus on any positionality instantly draws accusations of downplaying the rest (see below, 980-95).

In a piece on the African-American writer W.E.B. Du Bois, Bhabha argues for his technique of 'juxtaposition'. This is a way of writing which 'enforce[s] an ethical proximity... in-between social and cultural differences' (BSDP, 139). For example, racial injustice in one space is placed alongside symbols from a different, dominant space. This is meant to have the effect of displacing 'the authority and transparency of dominant norms' of discrimination (BSDP, 139). It reveals a 'double truth - at times incommensurable, at others, almost unbearable' (BSDP, 140). When a character has double consciousness (seeing from both dominant and oppressed points of view), juxtaposition taunts characters with their lack of wholeness (BSDP, 140). hybridity and mimicry. And it is an indication of the necessity of contingent articulations. Juxtaposition carries several textual dangers. There is a danger that contact across difference becomes smotheringly over-present. There is also a danger that the specificity of each person is lost in this over-proximity. Many will flee from the 'unbearable' message. These are costs which Bhabha either judges worth the risk, or does not recognise.



Bhabha also discusses the treatment of lack of solidarity among different racialised groups in Du Bois's *Dark Princess*, the 'betrayal of common purpose amongst minorities who share a common historical condition of racial oppression' (BSDP, 145), and prejudice between different oppressed groups. He asks, rhetorically, what this means. 'Is this the negation of human and ethical solidarity, or the necessary negotiation of cultural differences...?' (BSDP, 145). He implies that it is not. It simply shows the necessity of contingent articulation.

Most of Bhabha's discussions focus on art about colonialism or by artists from 'colonised' backgrounds (e.g. African-Americans). Artworks by migrant, hybrid, or minority artists are often praised for their successful, powerful transgressions of dominant binaries. Bhabha seems to assume such transgressions are effective, even though they may only be viewed by a tiny number of people, and not necessarily interpreted by these viewers in Bhabha's way. Artworks by white colonial authors are scoured for their internal ambiguity and for signs of the contradictions of colonialism. The internal ambiguities and disjunctures of these texts are often assumed to be equivalent to the disruptions carried out by colonised peoples (both in art and in life).

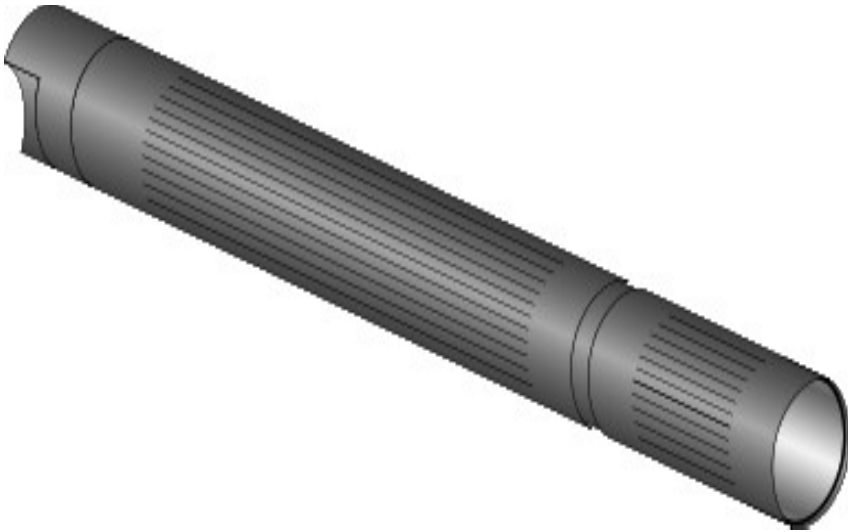
Bhabha assumes that identity is discursively constructed, that this construction arises from language and culture, and that language and culture are an integrated field. It therefore makes sense that he privileges high culture as a site of analysis and intervention. His theory lacks the resources to distinguish between high-end representations and the social constructs operative in everyday life. He assumes that, when analysing a prestigious art exhibit or a prize-winning novel, he is actually analysing the functioning of social power. He even seems to believe that his own and others' theoretical interventions are direct power-manoeuvres in this field of social power, with radical effects. These assumptions – the truth of which I doubt – nevertheless make sense of his political orientations.

According to Olson and Worsham (SPD), Bhabha sees writing as highly political. Writing is closely connected to acquiring agency (as a subject). It creates new dialogical relations among different elements. It allows a kind of choice and responsibility. It is a way for subaltern people to find a voice. Bhabha values writing as a strategic intervention. It is valued for its presumed effect, not due to academic criteria of competence or truth. It allows people to break, or break into, 'common sense', changing the naturalised underpinnings of everyday beliefs. Theory is meant to take us beyond standard forms of writing such as the sentence. However, it is also meant to avoid hardening into its own

form of mastery (SPD, 361-2). The role of theory is to open up a feeling of alienation or distance, similar to that provoked by Brecht's theatre (SPD, 368). The role of theory is also to 'break the continuity and the consensus of common sense' but also 'to break into it' (SPD, 367). Bhabha rejects the idea that theory should also reconceptualise or classify common sense the way Althusser does. He argues that ideology-critique, or rejection of common sense as false consciousness, pours ideological 'cement' into the fissures of common sense. Instead, he advocates occupying the fissures to see where it will get us. Bhabha seeks to disrupt dominant practices of generalisation (SPD, 368). This account is rather problematic. Firstly, Bhabha 'breaks' or disrupts common sense, but he does not transcend or overcome it. Secondly, by 'breaking into' it, he is recuperated within it. He fails to create a 'new conception of the world' as Gramsci (for example) seeks (1971:366, 401). And thirdly, his ruptures with common sense occur in a rarefied space, and not in everyday life. As a result, common sense as a philosophy or ideology, in its everyday effectiveness, continues to be unaffected. Everyday life also tends to be elided. Finally, Bhabha seems to value academic performativity greatly. His language is constructed more around style than substance (see above, 19-73).

This kind of praise of Bhabha echoes his own commentaries on other theorists. For example, he writes of Kristeva: 'Grafting the abyssal lack of psychoanalytic desire on to Hegelian Negation, Kristeva doubles and distracts the transcendent progress of the dialectic. In a theoretical move as skilful as the dance of Salome, Kristeva decapitates the dialectic... and introduces an unrelenting strangeness into the very lineaments of Ethical Life' (ONO, 2). The substantive issue here is that Hegel believed in progress towards a better future. Kristeva subverts this belief by likening Hegel's idea of negation to Lacan's idea of constitutive lack. Bhabha's discussion refers to technical Hegelian concepts (the dialectic, Ethical Life) which Kristeva reinterprets. However, there are also notable aspects of Bhabha's praise which are related to his wider values. Firstly, Bhabha values Kristeva's disruptiveness, not her affirmative views. Secondly, he singles out her rhetorical skill – here analogised to manipulative seduction – for particular praise. (Salome is a Christian Biblical

character whose dance persuades the ruler Herod to kill the pious John the Baptist). Thirdly, he assumes her critique is *effective* – simply on the basis of her own text. Bhabha talks about Kristeva disrupting the Hegelian categories *themselves* – not reinterpreting or critiquing them, not disrupting acceptance of them, but actually entering and subverting the categories. Fourth, 'unrelenting strangeness' is a virtue – a *desirable* thing to introduce. We shall return to this last theme later (below, 331-46).



Discussing the nature of common sense, Bhabha effectively subsumes it in liberalism. The liberal view of the social-individual relation is still 'substantially thought and lived' (LC, 36). I think this is a gross oversimplification. Common sense as an immanent philosophy cannot be reduced to particular theoretical projects. Most theorists have had little influence on common sense. And the dominant views held by the global elite are no longer "liberal". They rest on cybernetic and behaviourist assumptions that people are feedback machines (Invisible Committee, 2015). It is also questionable whether the liberal view also applies to "bad subjects". It is probably true that most people believe that individuals have agency. But this is by no means the only contestable claim within 'common sense'. Nor is it necessarily a naïve belief.

Bhabha's way of interpreting culture is influenced by Derrida and poststructuralism. According to poststructuralism, texts (including non-written artworks) do not have definite meanings. A reader only makes sense of a text by adding in other assumptions – by “understanding”, “interpreting” or “reading” the words and symbols. Readers have to 'decode' the meanings 'encoded' by the writer (see Hall, 1980). For example, a reader only understands a writer's description of a car because the reader already has a sense in their memory of what the word “car” means. They add their previous memories and experiences of “cars” and the word “car” to the writer's text. In cognitive psychology, this is talked about in terms of “schemas”. People's memory-system seems to stack particular images and memories in relation to the words or concepts which group them. So each person has a similar, but slightly different stack of memories or images which they associate with the word “car” or “sheep” or “European”.

If reading text by a historic author (like Shakespeare or Homer), or a writer from another culture, or even a writer from another positionality, a reader might “read” the text through different assumptions and background memories than those the author expected. For example, most modern readers read Shakespeare's kings through modern views of power. They don't have access to the background assumptions of medieval thought, such as the idea that God/fate rewards just rulers. Modern readers argue whether Shakespeare's Hamlet is meant to be “mad”. Madness as a concept was only beginning to form in Shakespeare's day, and was associated with spirit-possession or haunting, not medical disorders or different perceptions. In the same way, when people from conservative Arab communities watch the US soap opera *Dallas*, they reinterpret it in terms of their own expectations. For example, they assume that people living together (who are intended to be viewed as unmarried partners) are extended family relations (Ang, 1985). Similarly, when traditional Aboriginal Australians watch western movies like *Rocky*, they reinterpret them in terms of collective shame and personal attributes rather than individual achievement (Michaels, 2002).

And this might work with less obvious differences. Men and women might notice different aspects of a text. For instance, women might be more aware of how female characters are treated. Gay men might notice homoerotic subtexts which the author didn't necessarily intend. American heroic action movies pitting plucky rebels against evil empires can resonate with colonised people's struggles. Bhabha gives the example of colonial missionaries who found that Indians understood their teachings differently. The teachings are emptied of the 'syntagmatic supports – codes, connotations and cultural associations' which give it specific meanings (LC, 119). Instead, they are interpreted through existing features of Indian religious beliefs (LC, 33-4, 101, 102-4, 116-18). For example, Jesus ends up as a vegetarian. The position of the English as bearers of the holy text is re-read to render it compatible with their meat-eating. They are not really the bearers of the text, but just a tool used by God. This kind of rereading showed that the supposed self-evidence of Christian texts was a lie. And it meant that Indian Christianity, when it appeared at all, was subtly different from English Christianity. It might use the same words, but it used them to refer to different background assumptions. This disrupts colonial power. It also produces newness – new forms of knowledge, power, etc.



Poststructuralists stretch this kind of analysis to cover all kinds of readings. To “read” is to invent a new meaning of a text, in light of one's own background assumptions. Authors might assume there is a set of social meanings which allow their writings to

transmit meanings to readers. But in fact, this social-symbolic system – Lacan's 'big Other' – does not exist. Everyone has subtly different sets of background assumptions which they bring to a text. On a poststructuralist view, this means that readers in fact recreate a new meaning of the text each time it is read. And this view, in turn, validates tendentious and non-literal meanings as equal to more “obvious” readings. To “read” a text is always to invent its meaning. This way of understanding language is itself debatable. A critic might object that readers usually arrive at similar meanings of most texts, and that literal meaning is very often conveyed unproblematically. This seems to be a problem for the poststructuralist model.



In practice, there is usually some kind of limit on how far poststructuralists will 'read' a text against its apparent literal content. They won't usually, for instance, say that Oedipus never killed his father. But they will re-read and reinterpret what the text 'means'. For example, they might infer meanings from connotations of words or images, some of them anachronistic, which are not seen by most readers and not intended by the author. They might, for instance, decide that Hamlet is a story about the collapse of male authority in neoliberalism, even though Shakespeare could not possibly have intended that, and most readers will not pick it up.

This kind of reading can be productive in making texts relevant today, or relevant to groups other than the intended audience. It enables a free play of interpretation which can open it up to multiple meanings, and to different kinds of readers. However, it can also

create a rigid sense of the 'real' meaning of a text which is largely invented by the reader. For example, the reader can decide that a text is racist (or colonial, or sexist), the author is racist, and the audience who do not see it as racist are also racist, without any need for demonstrably racist elements in the text. They can decide that any text which does not conform to their own political or aesthetic ideology is racist, simply because it does not conform. Bhabha's readings sometimes tend in this direction. He tends to read artists and authors as meaning (at an unconscious level) the same things Bhabha says explicitly. He effectively subsumes others into his body of theory by eliding the specificity of their own projects.

Artists, Audiences, and Immanent Meanings

Because language is ambiguous, meaning is deferred, and signifiers 'slip' and 'play', texts are always open to multiple meanings. Some texts (such as modern art-works and so-called 'writerly' novels) encourage this process of open interpretation. Others try – but fail – to create authoritative meaning. This approach is very useful in understanding the ways in which texts are 'read' or interpreted by different readers, across cultures and historical periods. However, the denial of any meaning of the text as such can be taken as an open-ended license to read the text any way the reader pleases – projecting in whatever assumptions, prejudices and fixations the reader happens to have. This can have the effect of suppressing difference, because a text which disagrees with a reader's opinion can simply be 'read' to agree with them. It also has the effect of making any reality-check on a theory impossible – anomalous evidence can always be eliminated by 'reading' it differently.

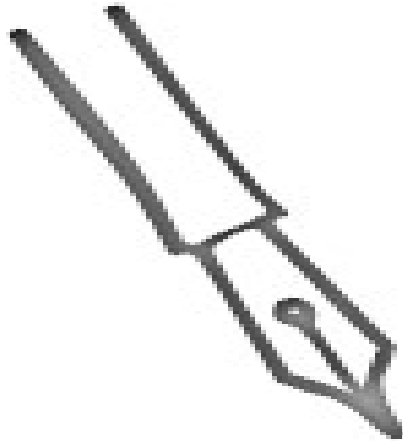
However, Bhabha does not go down the path of reader-response theory or "uses and gratification". He is not interested in the differing responses of individual readers, or their role in producing the experience of the text. This is clear from his debate with the artist

Jitish Kallat, who adheres to a postmodern/globalisation perspective which rejects the idea of homogeneous subject-positions. In the tradition of modern art, Kallat specifically tries to avoid interpellating his audience. 'I find it problematic to place a "manual of instructions" or a "manual of viewerly expectations" alongside an artwork'. Even viewers from the same positionality (race, gender, etc) 'might respond differently to [a work] based on, say, their orientation from the differing news channels they watch... or blogs and tweets emanating from other countries' (PN3, 77). This is an important check on Bhabha's tendency to impute a *single* audience position in relation to a work. And not surprisingly, Bhabha responds with reference to '*the* psych[ological] or fantasmatic "reading" of the work, and its affective implications', which are features of the 'subliminal, symptomatic, or even spectral presence' of the artwork itself (PN3, 77; my emphasis). This homogenisation of audiences is absolutely vital to Bhabha's project. Without it, there is no way Bhabha can project his own meanings onto texts themselves.



The concept of “affect” was recently revived, as a partial synonym for “emotion” or “feeling”, to emphasise the relational nature of experiences such as anxiety, anger, and joy. Bhabha picks up the word “affect”, but often uses it to refer to a passive-receptive emotional state. Indeed, he writes as if affects reside in particular works of art. Hence, ”emotional tone”, while irreducible to “meaning”, emanates from the affect that adheres to [a poem's] rhetorical articulation... Poetry does not rest in the realm of “idea” or “emotion”; it survives through recitation, by being passed from mouth to mouth, in an embodied circulation' (PAS, 64). Each performance creates a feeling of 'imminence' or renewal (PAS, 64). With both the author and the audience marginalised, Bhabha articulates

a structuralist, almost cybernetic view of circulating affects. He implies that affect is not produced differentially in the audience, but rather, is inherent to the poem or other cultural artefact, and circulates actively with it. This is how, for example, circulating chapatis can spread panic (see below, 497-9). Bhabha is not interested in how the poem, or the chapati, has to be *decoded* in order to produce a particular affect in its audience/participants. A cultural producer consciously or unconsciously constructs an affect which circulates within the artwork and is more-or-less passively received by the audience. This function can be used to produce the affects Bhabha finds politically desirable (see below, 331-46).



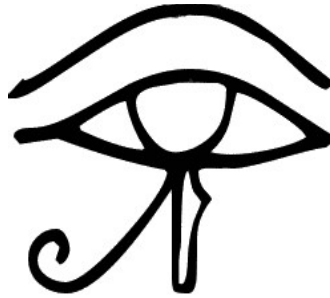
A poet is meant to take on an almost religious, 'oracular' (oracle-like) role: 'The struggle to reveal the individuated "agent" [i.e. a self or author] is a complex quest in a scenario in which the oracular poet dissembles his indirect Janus-faced discourse' (PAS, 66). The discourse is dissembling (i.e. lying), Janus-faced (i.e. two-faced), and renders the agency of the poet impossible to pin down. This 'oracular' role is similar to the role of poets in vedic India, or ancient Greece. However, it is hitched to a particular goal of destroying egos through what appears to be a kind of passive-aggressive, latently sadistic slipperiness. In this discourse, the poet or artist is broadly analogous to the Lacanian analyst (though considerably less humble). Art which fails to play this role is for Bhabha simply reinforcing

all the evils of modernity and the ego. This is why an artist such as Jitish Kallat, who refuses the idea that artworks have any such immanent affect, is a target of such opprobrium, including accusations of turning away from politics, ethics and aesthetics (PN3, 84). Affect may indeed circulate in the way Bhabha believes in intense, immanent settings such as shamanic rituals, spirit-possession rituals, or even crowd chants. But it seems unlikely that it can circulate so smoothly in mass media with impersonal audiences. Even if a signal is transmitted, it coexists with a large amount of what information theory calls “noise”.

In terms of the relationship between artist/artwork and audience, Bhabha rarely recognises the existence of multiple audiences and readings. Artworks are taken to have their own power. Partially criticising the idea of 'conversational art', he suggests that a silent artwork can have a similar effect to 'the silent presence of another person' (CA, 39). The artwork itself has a kind of presence. This presence intervenes unpredictably between the author's intent and the audience's reading (CA, 40). Conversational art is useful mainly in drawing attention to this space in which the artwork operates. Its defining gesture is contextual contingency (CA, 44). It refuses to respect the distance between subject and object which is created in traditional, silent art (CA, 44). Bhabha seeks democratisation of 'artistic production or circulation'. However, agitprop art is attacked as vanguardist, and pulling down 'bastions of privilege' as insufficient. Instead, Bhabha argues that placing an emphasis on artistic production is vital. 'Democracy depends, to a great degree, on a culture of public belief' that 'questions of values and knowledge are... deeply linked to the matter of cultural practice and public policy' (CA, 40). Art is thus seen as a means of moulding values in different directions – the same function it is given by censorious writers such as Plato. Artists should always represent, or stage, a politics of contingency in Bhabha's sense. A truly 'free' artist will always make Bhabha's choice, since 'freedom' does not mean 'choosing the more hopeful, progressive reading while obscuring the obduracy of the negative impulse' (CA, 47). Only those who accept the truth of Bhabha's doctrine are truly free.

However, Bhabha also likes some aspects of conversational art. He has a strong prejudice against visual processes, and a preference for verbal or textual processes. The problem with visual perception is that it constitutes an observed object. Western thought is criticised for conceiving knowledge primarily in visual terms. This is said to create 'a tyranny of fact over value, logic over rhetoric'. It leads to an illusion that objects contain an essential truth. Focusing on conversation instead emphasises a contingent 'encounter', or 'confrontation', with an object (CA, 41). Taking away the visual metaphor also supposedly destroys distinctions between reason and its others – desire, appetite, and will (CA, 42). This opens the audience to Bhabha's preferred field of contingency and survival (see below, 331-46, 913-18). It speaks to 'the ironic and contradictory forces that constitute social reality' (CA, 42). The type of artworks Bhabha likes involve a commitment to living and creating 'from experiences that are ambivalent, contradictory, and unresolved', and which are 'disturbing, even dark' (CA, 42). Bhabha seeks, in effect, to move away from observations of objects, towards intersubjective kinds of perception and knowledge. He elevates voice over vision.

In another piece, Bhabha suggests that rhetoric speaks to people at a deeper, more real level than literal discourse. 'The adult's earnest questions posed in a rationalized, normative discourse can only be answered by addressing the inchoate distress of the child *within*... The oracular poet, like the Freudian joker, is a master of displacement and dissembling who opens up a "third" space of enunciation to unsettle' subject-object binaries (PAS, 65). Bhabha here speaks to the psychoanalytic insight that symptomatic complexes operate on levels other than rational thought. But rather than using this insight to reduce neurotic suffering, Bhabha proposes to use it to disrupt meaning and intensify the experience of disjuncture. This requires using a kind of discourse which always disrupts (or in a sense, "trolls") others, instead of a direct, rational or literal discourse. The point is not to reach the truth, nor to heal a symptom; the point is to tear down the ego. Elsewhere, Bhabha questions why morally good characters are rarely rhetorically fluent. He claims rhetorical ability is important in enabling people to speak (DM1, 179).



This binary between voice and vision is developed into Bhabha's critique of colonial objectivity as a scopic, or visual, drive (see below, 485-8). For now, a few qualifiers are in order. Firstly, what is processed through the senses is mediated in a way, but is arguably less mediated than the constructs of language. It does not rely so directly on socially-defined signifiers. Secondly, there are arguably different styles of thinking, and Bhabha's approach discriminates against visual thinkers. And thirdly, despite Bhabha's snarl-word "tyranny", it is hard to see why he would object to a preference for logic over rhetoric, or in descriptive matters, object to fact-checking. In the interests of safety, would one really prefer to cross a bridge designed by an engineer who preferred rhetoric and values over logic and facts? It may be true, however, that the visual level of experience is misleading. Processes which are complex, interconnected, or involve 'becomings' appear visually as distinct objects (Korzybski, 1995/1932). It is well-known in psychology that social meanings influence direct sensory perceptions as well as language (e.g. Carmichael et al., 1934; see also *Gestalt* psychology). It is also true that "brute fact" tends to trump subjective meaning in modernity, and this tends to disenchant life and render it meaningless. And the "facts" in question are often superficial, ignoring what cannot be seen, and relying on mathematically built illusions.

It seems dangerous, however, to dispense with sensory knowledge and instead treat conversation as absolute. If one replaces 'reason' and 'facts' with 'conversation', one ends

up with a tyranny of groupthink, when 2+2 can equal 5 and the naked Emperor is taken to be wearing clothes because the social 'conversation' says so. (Interaction does not seem to be a necessary part of 'conversation' in Bhabha's sense). If one overemphasises values at the expense of facts, one ends up with moralised misperceptions of reality, and stark moral demands which ignore the rule that 'ought implies can'. The history of the suppression of 'facts' and 'logic' when they conflict with 'values' is not a good one; one might variously cite the execution of Socrates, the reactions to Copernicus and Darwin, or Soviet Lysenkoism as examples. It is also important to note that many of the authors taken by postcolonial theorists as exemplary of "modern reason" were deeply distrusting of visual perception. Descartes preferred rational deduction to the senses, because the senses can be fooled. Kant saw autonomous reason as morally superior to observations about the 'heteronomous' outer world. Plato believed that Forms, accessible to Reason, are ultimately more real than observed 'appearances'. The distance between austere modern reason and the austere insistence on lack is not as great as postcolonial theorists suggest. Both run through similar pathways of superego distrust of both id and ego, with their more direct relations to the outer world. On the other hand, there is nothing specifically 'colonial' about visual knowledge. In contrast, the modern west goes furthest in valuing abstract, indirectly obtained knowledge over direct perception. In contrast, in the Yoruba language, the word for 'be' is the same as the word for direct perception. Both are distinguished from indirect knowledge – a fact which undermines the influence of western education and beliefs (Hallen, 2004). The stakes between visual and textual "truths" are not really Northern and Southern, but rather, substantivist and lackist.

Bhabha reads Regina Frank's work *The Glass Bead Game* in these terms. Frank is a white German woman, and a follower of Heidegger and *advaita* doctrines. Her work is often interactive and sometimes associated with progressive politics. Her work often plays with the theme of the artist's presence and/or absence. Her works include interactive games, a performance of sitting in silence with audience members, and awareness-raising works about ecological crisis. Another, called *Whiteness in Decay*, involved projecting audience

responses onto a canvas behind Frank, who was encased in white plaster cast. Frank then gradually dismantled the cast and handed fruit to the audience. The GlassBeadGame (named after a Herman Hesse novel) involved interlinking excerpts from different literary works. Viewers could add items through a computer program accessible online. The work was intended as a contribution to world peace, a game without winner or loser (Loose Threads, 1998). Frank's use of Japanese themes such as kimonos might today be attacked as appropriation; in the 1990s, it instead allowed Frank to enter the Japanese art market for the first time.

Bhabha, however, reads the work in his own terms. Frank's work is supposedly conversational rather than visual. It is dark, contradictory, disturbing, ambivalent, unresolved. Frank, as artist, is both present and absent at the same time. She thus enacts a 'dialectical strategy' of 'shifting identifications between art and audience, between history and memory' (CA, 43). The connection of different contexts through her beads is 'each time healing the breach of confrontational, binary thinking' (CA, 43). She thus creates a sense of 'the value of culture as a textual experience that will not abide polarities' (CA, 44). Frank thus happens to be performing in practice what Bhabha advocates in theory. But is she? Since Frank is an *advaita*/Heideggerian artist, it is unsurprising that she shares Bhabha's critique of binaries. She apparently views culture as a networked, holistic field. However, her works suggest affects very different from those favoured by Bhabha (see below, 331-46). Her work involves powerful processes of connection and emergence, suggesting a kind of ecological holism rather than linguistic co-constitution. Bhabha thus relies on meanings of the artwork, independent of authorial intent, to attach her work to his own conclusions. Another irony here is that Frank's work is often genuinely interactive and open to different readings. In contrast, Bhabha's work *resists* this kind of multiple reading in which the text exceeds the author's intent. It *does not* heal binaries, but rather, reproduces them (see below, 251-8, 264-8, 274-6). It does not weave an ever-changing tapestry, but repeats the same doctrine endlessly. It does this, because its openness to contingency is ultimately subordinate to its lackism (see below, 251-8, 264-8).



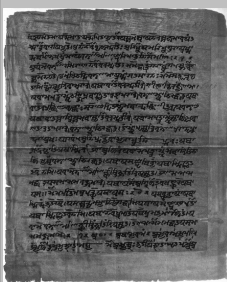
According to Deleuze and Guattari, there are two recurring figures of authority in the history of the state: the **philosopher-king** and the **poet-priest**. A philosopher-king rules in the way Bhabha criticises. They express a supposed transcendental power of the Idea, reason, or thought (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:24). Deleuze and Guattari are thinking here of the role given to philosophers by Plato in *The Republic*. Bhabha's critique of modern reason similarly targets philosopher-kings. A poet-priest instead performs a kind of 'magical capture' based on the imaginary (the non-symbolic field of images and affects). Such capture involves a moment of foundation, such as a social contract (1987:374-5). These two forms of power may be said to relate to the distinct processes of social subjection (as a subject) and machinic enslavement (as a cog in a machine). Deleuze and Guattari believe that social subjection displaced machinic enslavement in modernity, but that cybernetic systems are now restoring machinic enslavement (1987:428, 457-8). The decline of social subjection – the crisis of representation, the death of the subject – involves an important social shift. However, it does not overcome political authority. It simply displaces it. If Deleuze and Guattari are right, then the tearing-down of

philosopher-kings carries within it a threat of the autocracy of the other figure, the poet-priest who magically captures and binds the community.

One place to look for poet-priests is in ancient India. The Indian *vedas* are among the earliest written works in history. Northern India appears to have been conquered (or possibly settled) by an ethnic group referred to as “Indo-Aryans”, somewhere roundabout 2000-1500 BCE. The conquerors or migrants defined themselves as *arya* (noble) in contrast to the earlier inhabitants. They also developed an elaborate religion which attempted to justify their superiority. Presumably earlier peoples had shamanic or animist beliefs. In fact, the later conquerors often attributed the magical power of *soma* (some kind of entheogenic or mind-altering plant) to the earlier inhabitants. However, the settlers' doctrine is formulated in opposition to earlier animism. This religion, known as **vedic** (from *vedas*, or holy texts), is similar to the Zoroastrian practices which were predominant in pre-Islamic Iran (and which the Parsis practice). Vedic religion is a forerunner of modern Hinduism, but scholars are reluctant to refer to it as Hindu. Hinduism as currently practiced involves many later ideas formulated in medieval or modern times.

The relevance of vedic religion to Bhabha's work is the importance it attaches to poets and wordsmiths. In ancient India, poet-priests known as *brahmins* were a ruling group. Their power rested on a presumed ability to manipulate matter. Vedic beliefs included an assumption that similarity meant sameness. Things which were alike, or ritually equivalent, were somehow of the same substance. They could therefore be manipulated to affect one another (Jamison and Witzel, 1992:26). For example, a ritual performed over a fire could affect the rising and setting of the sun, because the sun and the fire are incarnations of the same spirit/substance. Through rituals, humans can 'take hold... of the primal energy' of the

principle of creation, and even become 'the equal of gods or of the primal creative principle itself' (Padoux, 1990:xii, 4). There is a fundamental, practical relationship between microcosm – the small, local incarnation of a principle or substance – and macrocosm – the cosmic order of the entire universe (Jamison and Witzel, 1992:49). One can influence the macrocosm by acting on the microcosm, because similarity is substantial sameness. For example, the vedic fire ritual was believed to be necessary so as to keep the sun rising each day. Such magical practices can be used to protect, or conceivably to change, the social order. If one assumes that similarity means sameness, the transgression of a norm in a microcosmic, artistic or ritual setting also magically impacts on the norm on its macrocosmic, social scale.



The power of poet-priests was tied into their knowledge of a complicated, specialised language inaccessible to others. Vedic priests spoke a special ritual language called Sanskrit. Sanskrit words were believed to have a specially close relationship to the things they referred to. The Sanskrit name

belonged to the substance of the thing. It was believed to be possible to affect real things by manipulating their Sanskrit names. The holy texts, known as the *vedas*, contained many scripts for performing rituals. These are usually poetic in form. They are constructed to be practically effective, not simply aesthetic or speculative. If language is divine, then knowledge is power: 'to know the truth of something [is] to have control over it. To know the world is therefore also to master the world and to direct one's fate' (Brereton, 1990:133-4). Some ritual words even lack an obvious meaning, instead carrying connotative or spiritual import. These are similar to the mana-words discussed by Barthes (1997:104). The word itself possesses a kind of power, or mana, distinct from its referential function.

Ancient Indian thought involves complex philosophical systems which seem designed to produce awe. 'No language of ancient or modern times contains more philosophical terms than Sanskrit... Indian thought arrives at subtleties of distinction so varied and acute that the uninitiated the unprepared reader may well receive the impression that Indian philosophers enjoy the use of half a dozen intellects instead of one' (Tomlin, 1986:115). The resultant 'gigantic thought structures' are prone to 'overawe' readers (1986:116). The historian of ideas Tomlin believes that these texts do not aim for vagueness. Indeed, they seek to combat it. They strive for accuracy beyond everyday experience. However, they often involve extreme abstraction. They strip things both of their qualities and of any impurities (Tomlin, 1986:122). The risk of such paring-back is that one may be left with nothing, or with something unrecognisable. However, these abstractions are designed to talk about things which can't be said in everyday language.

Knowledge of the Sanskrit language, and the rituals contained in the *vedas* (ritual texts), were closely guarded by the *brahmin* priests. This knowledge was taken to give them almost magical powers, based on the creative power of the word. In mythic thought, in India as elsewhere, to give a name is to give something being (Jamison and Witzel, 1992:7). Speak of the devil and he will appear. Not only is Sanskrit a divine language of revelation, but its grammar is 'a gateway to salvation' (Deshpande, 1992:271; c.f. Padoux, 1990:1). The Word (*ṛā*), as a free act, expresses a 'primordial principle' of 'pure, creative spontaneity, the flashing forth of the uninhibited power and overflowing bounty of the divine' (Padoux, 1990:xii). It is thus possible to change the world by means of language. 'The close relation between ritual and magic leads to... an ascription of creative action to the power of words or sound. That is, the potency of words is considered to be the effective

creative force', which brings things into being (Brown, 1965:27). There is thus a fundamental difference between pre-linguistic *ṛ̥* and western 'language' or logos (Padoux, 1990:xviii). *Ṛ̥* is a kind of pre-alienated force, existing within and behind language.

Vedic thought took linguistic structures to be prior to and determinant of material forms. Certain binary oppositions precede and constitute the world. For example, the split between male and female kinds of creative power and their subsequent interaction gives rise to creation, and the act of casting away the sun (i.e. lack or exclusion) gives rise to cyclical time and the material world (Brown, 1965:30). However, the Word as 'pure and free act' is alienated in human language, which is bound by conventions. Language can thus enslave humans. However, if one can recognise the creative power of the Word as a concealed truth behind the appearances of language, one can return to the free source. This is generally thought to be achieved through reciting mantras, many of which are enigmatic (Padoux, 1990:xii). For example, one passage challenges readers to imagine something which neither exists nor does not exist (Brereton, 1999:250). The riddles and correlations of mantras found in the vedic texts are central to this disalienating purpose (1). One thus reaches the disalienated level of *ṛ̥* through the manipulation, subversion, and complexification of the alienated level of language. This is surprisingly similar to Derridean theory, and very different from authors such as Deleuze (1994) and Zerzan (n.d.a), for whom representation in language is a barrier to creative spontaneity.

It also appears that vedic doctrine maintained that thought preceded desire, and ideas preceded material substance (Brereton, 1999:254). The ambivalent substance which neither exists nor does not exist is thought itself. The audience's 'active mental engagement, mirrors the original power of creation, and their gradually developing understanding

recapitulates the process of creation' (1999:255). Therefore, 'all forms of reproduction are ultimately grounded in the creativity of thought' (1999:259). The classical Indian view was generally that language relates words to things. The speaker's subjectivity plays no important role.

Brereton argues that the ambivalence and enigma of texts like Rg Veda 10.129 attempt to shift or "recover" words so as to point to something wordless. They pass from a situation where there is "no sign" (or word) to one of a "signless" something (1999:252). Words are used which suggest at once non-existence and coming-into-existence, indicating a 'state hovering between non-existence and existence' (1999:253). This is noticeably similar to Bhabha's notion of inbetweenness (see Chapter 5). This kind of affective paradox-mongering is not merely a mental process. The process within the reader is a microcosmic mirror of processes on the macrocosmic scale. As we have seen, such mirroring is taken to partake of the same substance and thus to influence creation itself. Forcing an audience to ponder enigmas and pass through ambivalence and confusion re-enacts and carries out anew the creation of the world. Poets have a special place and power in the vedic system. 'Since the poets' "inspired thinking" is the epitome of thought, they possess the connection between existent and non-existent... Their skill in speech is the "distinguishing mark" that sets priests apart from all others, and their mastery of it secures their well-being' (Brereton, 1999:255). Poets (or *brahmins*) are thus a kind of ruling class. They possess the keys to creation and to magically manipulating the universe. Educators also belong to this ruling class.

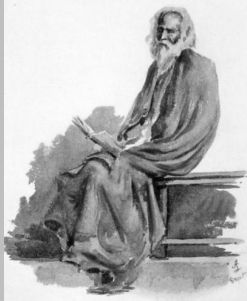
Vedic rituals are designed to preserve creation and prevent inertia, but also to maintain balance and prevent unwanted change. Chaos is associated with darkness, inertia, and conservatism. Humans need to keep creativity moving in order to survive (Brown, 1965:24).



Creation is an ongoing process of divine self-completion, each moment of which becomes a specific social or individual trait (van Buitenen, 1964:108). Ritual

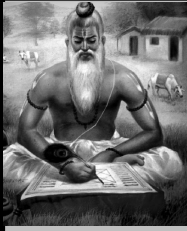
actions are ways of maintaining an equilibrium in which cosmic forces flow optimally. They establish reciprocity with gods, and do not need to have a knowable meaning (Hamilton, 2001:19-20). One of the roles of the poet-priest is to produce enigmas so as to re-enact creation. However, the poet-priest also has role of making the world more predictable, controllable, and familiar (Brereton, 1990:120).

Advaita (nondualism) was a later addition to the changing Indian tradition. Its origins are not entirely clear, and there are foreshadowings in some of the earlier *vedas*. Some scholars have suggested the possibility that *advaita* was formulated by members of the *kṣatriya* warrior caste, although this is unproven (Jamison and Witzel, 1992:48; Horsch, 1966). The *kṣatriya* were not a subaltern group, but probably the second most powerful group after the *brahmins*. It is to be expected that they would challenge *brahmin* hegemony with an ethos based on military austerity. If this is the root of the doctrine, then it is analogous to republican and communitarian ideologies in ancient and medieval Europe. Another possibility is that esoteric monism emerged in reaction to social atomisation. Earlier ritual practices may have broken down due to social changes, and monism filled the gap (Brereton, 1999:260).



This later doctrine goes further than the subversion of language in vedic religion. In the earliest forms of the *advaita* tradition, distinctions between self and other were seen as ultimately illusory. Everyone and everything ultimately expresses a single substance, which is not just similar but the same. It involves 'the view that there is a single reality hidden by the multiple forms of the world' (Brereton, 1990:116). This fundamental oneness is at the core of everything, including each individual. This view leads to the idea of the *ātman*, which is at once the higher self and a holistic deindividuation (1990:118). It is either the highest form of being, or the second-highest, after something called the 'unmanifest' (van Buitenen, 1964:112-14). Because similarity equals sameness (of substance), the self is at core simply this unitary substance. The individual self is an illusion. As one scholar argues of the view articulated in the *Upanishads*: '[t]he neighbor is truly the self, for both are *ātman* at the core. It is only mere illusion that deludes one into thinking of the self as separate from, and threatened by, the other' (Hundersmarck, 1995:158-9).

Ātman is reached through negation. Because it is holistic, it is nonbinary. It has no attributes. Therefore, it can only be described in terms of "not this, not that" (Brereton, 1990:126). It can be known intuitively, but not attained through study or instruction (1990:128). This root state which the self "is", is distinct from all its attributes and deeds. This is the polar opposite of Nietzsche's identification of the self with its deeds. It is also extra-empirical and not verifiable or falsifiable. All specific observable phenomena are reduced to the status of mere appearances. Paradoxically, this Indian tradition is thus close to the work of Descartes, Kant and Plato, who similarly theorise a kind of essential, extra-phenomenal self.



The role of poet-priests does not disappear with *advaita*. Philosophy comes to play a greater role relative to poetry, but the way philosophy is practised is also poetic. The Upanishads are usually read in the west as philosophy. However, they do not provide

systematisations of meaning in the way western philosophy does. Rather, they involve a poetic discourse of 'associations and expansions' (Brereton, 1990:118). This is apparent, for example, in the origin narrative. There is believed to be a hierarchy of appearances leading back to the foundations of things (Brereton, 1990:119; van Buitenen, 1964:108). In the beginning, there is only *ātman*. But *ātman* decides to create. From this decision flows a series of processes culminating in the material world (Brereton, 1990:120). The creation of the universe is a poetic process. Its deconstruction back to *ātman* is similarly poetic and enigmatic.

This tradition may provide a basis for Bhabha's love of ego-bashing. However, the pursuit of transpersonal identity beyond the ego is also a claim to power, since 'to identify with a self which stands above any recognizable object is to become invulnerable' (Brereton, 1990:126). The *advaita* doctrine involves a strange mixture of humility and omnipotence. On the one hand, humans are utterly dependent on nature. This leads to demands for humility and social conformity (since society and nature are analogous). On the other, natural forces can be steered and manipulated using ritual. Humans are taken to have a familiar place in an order which is familiar, rather than alien (Brereton, 1990:120). *Advaita* avoids various mechanisms of modern power, but can also be plugged into hierarchical power-systems. For example, the separation of the "true" self from outer actions may encourage people to be quietist or unprincipled. It may encourage openness to being manipulated and to manipulating others – since one's actions have nothing to do with what one really is. And it can encourage cruel handwaving towards others' suffering, which is put down

to others' being trapped in the world of appearance. The claimed possession of non-falsifiable enigmatic knowledge is frustratingly resistant to rebuttal. One sometimes finds the same smug self-satisfaction in poststructuralists which is also found in certain kinds of religious believers.

Many of these classical ideas are certainly thought-provoking when considered as philosophy. However, they also have sociological significance. The vedic belief-system attaches a lot of social importance to the poet-priest role. Some scholars believe that the vedic tradition expressed a kind of 'class consciousness' of the Brahmin social group (Proferes, 2011:31). The idea that thought or speech generates reality assigns to poet-priests the role of 'inspired' thinkers set apart by their mastery of speech (Brereton, 1999:255). Because they are poets, priests were believed to be able to establish order in the universe, harnessing the Word (Padoux, 1990:6). Hence, poet-priests could claim credit for desirable events, and cast dire warnings should they be ignored. For example, military victory is attributed to ritual, rather than the actions of warriors. The defeat of an impious enemy is analogous to the ritual summoning of the sun to overcome darkness, and is thus mainly attributable to the poet-priests (Findly, 1982:16, 30). The "Aryan" nobles are superior, and the original people spiritually barbaric, because the former possesses the correct rituals of the poet-priests, and the latter does not. Also, social institutions are often treated analogically – and thus, the same in substance – to natural processes. This has conservative effects.

If one believes their claims, then poet-priests are necessary to make the sun rise in the morning, to win battles, to ward off social chaos and inertia, to sustain or repeat the creation of the world, to keep and use the divine words which provide true power, to channel divine and cosmic forces, communicate with the gods, maintain knowledge of the nature of things,

protect bodily health, and enact various kinds of magic. They are the most important and indispensable social group without whom everything would collapse. It is usually the case that popular or folk religions do not accept these claims at face-value (see Scott, 1977a, 1977b). Nonetheless, they articulate a powerful claim to social primacy.

There are a number of ways in which Bhabha echoes the vedic function of the poet-priest. One can summarise these as follows:

- Complexification of language. Like the vedic texts, Bhabha develops an elaborate language distinct from the everyday. Only a few initiates have access to this language. It involves subtle and closely related philosophical concepts. Many of these concepts vary only slightly from each other. The whole apparatus tends to overawe or intimidate readers.
- Superiority of ritual, specialised language over everyday language. Bhabha treats poststructuralist buzzwords as having far more power than ordinary speech. The “experts” who know this language are not to “dumb it down”, and may even guard it from casual misuse.
- Acting on the macrocosm via the microcosm. Bhabha places great faith in the ability of theorists, artists and writers to have an impact directly on politics through the production of cultural texts (see Chapter 2).
- Priority of language over matter. Although Bhabha is somewhat evasive on this question, in practice he treats linguistic structures as generative of social structures.
- Neglect of subjectivity. Bhabha tends to portray texts and abstract concepts as if they act on one another.
- Language as binarised and alienating (see Chapter 1).

- Language as nonetheless a necessary or privileged path to a disalienated state. Like the vedic tradition, Bhabha favours the use of enigma and paradox to provide access to the inbetween zone or the process of creating newness.
- Looking for something hidden, which “shines through” from behind language. The process of textuality and the inbetween zone are not directly expressible in language, but nonetheless, can somehow be produced through it.
- Manipulation of language as a means to directly affect the world. Bhabha does not recognise any difference between linguistic and material acts (see above, 151). He often portrays artists and theorists as directly producing material effects.
- Extreme abstraction. Bhabha prefers working with very high-level, abstract philosophical concepts.
- Use of enigma. Like the vedic tradition, Bhabha often uses enigmatic and paradoxical language in an attempt to produce a particular subjective effect in his readers.
- Inbetweenness as privileged space. The inbetween zone – which goes by many names in Bhabha's work – is one of his favourite topics (see Chapter 5).
- Treatment of poetic language as more “real”, or effective, than prose. Bhabha dislikes direct, literal language. He sees it as caught within binaries. He prefers ambivalent, rhetorical expression.
- Valorisation of poetic virtuosity. Bhabha praises rhetorical skill, not logical consistency, empirical knowledge, interpersonal awareness, or emotional expressiveness, as the central virtue needed to produce desired linguistic effects.

- An endless process of creation which has extra-human sources and does not require human comprehension. While Bhabha does not talk about divine self-creation, there are echoes in his assumptions that social texts produce both themselves and us.
- A mixture of flow-based creativity and conservatism. For Bhabha, as for vedic religion, fixity is bad. The flow of textual production needs to be kept active. But for Bhabha, as for Vedic religion, the purpose of this active flow is ultimately conservative. The same creative acts must be repeated over and over to keep the same forces flowing.
- Magical effectiveness, rather than dialogue. Bhabha seeks to “work magic” in the world, to produce effects at a distance, and not to influence others rationally.
- Re-enacting the creation of newness. Bhabha's account of newness (see above, 145, 163) is similar to the vedic idea of re-enacting and repeating the divine act of creation through reproducing an affective zone of subjectivity.
- A poetic discourse of associations and expansions. Bhabha's works often involve bringing different texts or concepts into close contact so as to associate them and produce an effect somewhere between them.

There are also differences. For example, I have not found any indications that Bhabha believes that similarity equals sameness, although some of his claims make more sense if this is assumed. (Assuming the vedic view that similarity or analogy is sameness, it makes sense to view the otherness of other people as in a sense the same as the otherness of one's own unconscious). Nonetheless, Bhabha appears to be rebuilding much of the edifice of the poet-priest archetype. This seems radical, because the modern west has been dominated by philosopher-kings. Yet it simply replaces one kind of boss with another. The poet-priest figure is not alien to Europe.

It is never entirely clear what the proponents of poetry targeted by Plato in the Republic and elsewhere actually thought, but it seems possible that they adhered to beliefs similar to vedic doctrine (and to Bhabha). Medieval Christianity also involved strong rhetorical elements of this kind. Today's populists are also primarily rhetoricians.

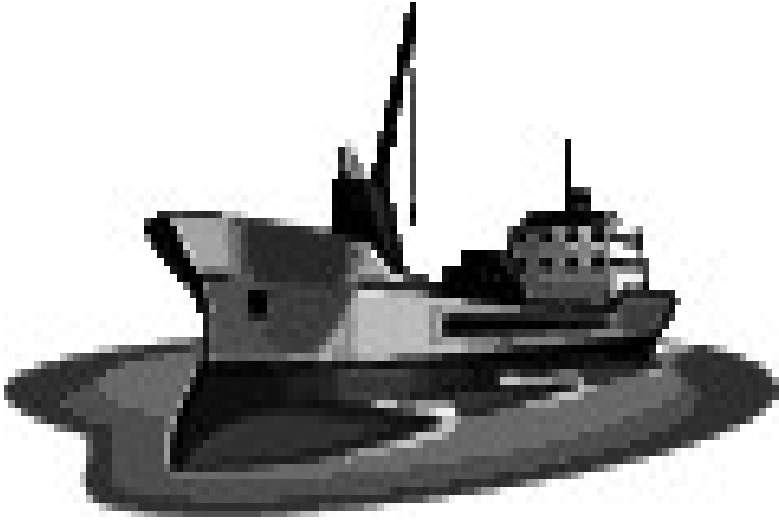
Today, philosopher-kings are going through crisis. Their power is undermined by the breakdown of continuous, linear thought. The time seems ripe for poet-priests to make a fresh bid for power. But the power of poet-priests is not necessarily any less hierarchical or oppressive than that of philosopher-kings. Rather, it is associated with machinic enslavement, both historically and in the emerging cybernetic power-regime. It is thus possible that positions such as Bhabha's reflect a kind of emerging class consciousness of a new elite of symbolic manipulators who exercise power through channelling cybernetic flows, much as older poet-priests claimed to channel natural forces (except that the forces they channel today are artificial effects of global capitalism). If so, then the struggle against "modern reason" is actually part of a struggle between two contending elite factions for social authority. A truly radical alternative would instead seek to break down both types of political authority. Deleuze's view of philosophy as a process of producing new possibilities is an example of this. So, for example, is Illich's (1971) argument for skill-sharing among non-experts. It has been observed that ritual and magic probably began as collective social practices before being monopolised by experts (Wilson, 1998). The various doctrines of poet-priests might therefore be alienated variations of these initial practices. Radical thought needs to reorient to a project of recovering autonomous practice, and not establish itself as a foothold for poet-priests.

Fishing for Interpretations

The tenuousness of Bhabha's readings is reflected in critiques of his work. For example, in one passage, Bhabha analyses the exhibition *Fish Story*, by the white American photographer and film-maker Allan Sekula. The exhibition presents naturalistic images of fishing harbours in the age of neoliberalism (it dates from 1995). For Bhabha, this is a work on 'the borderline condition of cultural translation', taken to its 'global limit'. It shows the 'non-synchronous time-space of transnational "exchange", and exploitation'. It also shows how migrant experiences 'drown out' the Norwegian national anthem, and how migrants 'embody the Benjaminian "present"' (LC, 11-12). The Benjaminian present is a ruptural, revolutionary moment which is dramatically blasted out of the continuum of historical time. Hence, Bhabha reads the work as affirming many of his recurring themes and personal beliefs. It is about valuing the inbetween space. It is about the revolutionary potential of the inbetween space. It is about migrants as displaced people whose everyday practice displays or brings about inbetween spaces. It is about the collapse of fixed, authoritative identities such as nationalism. It is about the progressive effects of migration, and of the disruptive effects of neoliberal flows more broadly.

In practice, the artworks he discusses do not necessarily resonate with his readings. For instance Sekula's *Fish Story* is not usually read as an account of migration. Such a reading is neither what the artist intends, nor what the audience sees. Sekula's authorial intent is largely Marxist. He focuses on what he terms 'the imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capitalist world' (BAMPFA, 1992). *Fish Story* is a Marxist-inflected work about the damaging effects of capitalism on workers (Perloff, 2001:119-20). It deals with the loss of the constructive role of industry in everyday life, and the loss of connection between local economic activity and the local population. The message of social destruction due to transnational capital is, says Perloff, 'curiously at odds' with Bhabha's liminal model (2001:122). In other words, Sekula provides an artistic critique of the very phenomena of transnational precarity, collapse of meaning, and deindustrialisation which

Bhabha celebrates – and uses *Fish Story* to celebrate! The question here is, does Bhabha 'misrepresent' Sekula's work? Does he do it some kind of interpretive violence by inverting its political meaning? Or is he simply providing another, equally valid take on a 'text' which is necessarily contestable – in line with the ambiguous nature of all signification?

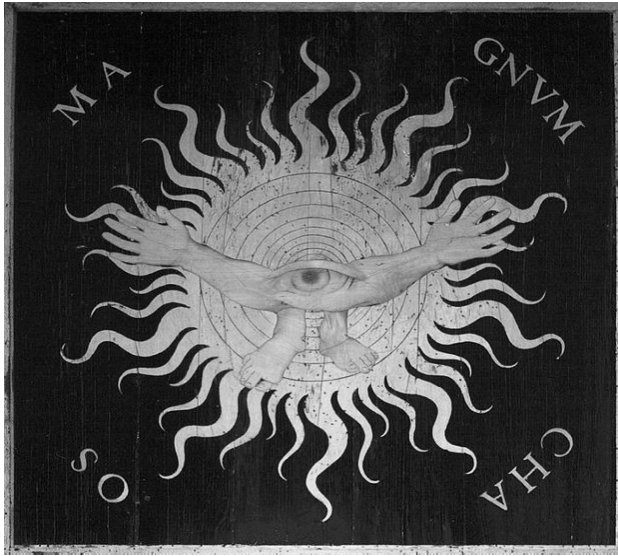


Critics maintain that Bhabha misrepresents, and this has authoritarian effects. According to Perloff, Bhabha treats artworks as having only instrumental value. He uses them as illustrations of his critical, political, or ideological views (2001:118). He treats novels, artworks and poems as simply illustrative material for his larger project (2001:124). This is a performative contradiction, given that he sees all sites as hybrid and liminal (in-between) (2001:118). It is also problematic from a political point of view. Perloff sees this practice as part of the commodification of literature and art (2001:124). It destroys the specific meaning and flow of artistic practices, turning them into exchangeable signs which can be combined and recombined in the marketplace. In other words, Bhabha's practice of ripping works from their context is similar to the way capital rips things from their contexts to turn them into commodities.

Bhabha's reading of a poem by Adil Jussawalla presents similar problems. The poem contrasts the English letter A with the Hindi letter अ (pronounced “er”). Jussawalla presents the displacement of Hindi by English. He suggests the Hindi letter once filled the valleys with light. The letter A sounds like a laugh (ha ha), whereas अ sounds like a cough. Bhabha reads the passage as a contrast between the letter A as 'the sign of linguistic objectivity', and अ as showing that 'the object of linguistic science is always already in an enunciatory process of cultural translation' which also shows the hybridity of all relationships. The letter अ suggests that cultures never have 'inherent authenticity and purity' and that they are always translated through an other (LC, 58). It's not clear how Bhabha has got from the passage he cites to the view of अ as a sign of hybridity, and still less how this shows that *all* language has this function. Jussawalla's tone seems rather more nostalgic. Jussawalla's own position seems rather similar to the “diversity” approaches Bhabha dislikes. According to him, different languages do different things, and people are rooted wherever they are. Jussawalla is also opposed to so-called “political correctness” as a threat to the vitality of poetic language. And he thinks culture has little social effect (Das Gupta, 2016). Poetry is suggestive, and its effect on readers can vary. But the impression is unavoidable that Bhabha sees his own reflection in the works he reads.

Similarly, when Bhabha reads the poetry of Derek Walcott, a Caribbean author, he reads-in his own theoretical concerns. 'Walcott's purpose is not to oppose... [but] to reorganize our sense of the process of identification in the negotiation of cultural politics... [and] by questioning the masculinist, authoritative subjectivity produced in the colonizing process' (LC, 233). The passage cited to back this view - 'Being men, they could not live except they first presumed the right of everything to be a noun' - does not at necessarily entail this reading. Walcott, like Bhabha, is clearly interested in reinfections of meanings, and in the colonial legacy. However, it is not clear that he addresses the issue of subjectivity, or that he values negotiation/subversion in Bhabha's sense. Walcott's work focuses on religious themes. Ego-decomposition is conceived in terms of religious ecstasy. He feels

Caribbean writers were deprived of the privilege of writing, and were elated to achieve it after decolonisation, based on western models of writing (Walcott and Hirsch, 1986). Bhabha thus simplistically appends Walcott to his own theory, ignoring his own contributions.



In another article, Bhabha similarly reads 'the ambivalence of black textuality', including the use of trickster figures, and 'the improvisatory "cut" in jazz' as more-or-less directly Derridean. '[T]he cut is the desire for supplementarity - the desire for the work to go *on* - without any imperative that it should march on progressively' (OF, 183-4). Probably jazz musicians are unaware that they are taking sides between different high-theoretical positions. But Bhabha thinks they are striking blows against linear progress, for a process of survival without direction. Black literature and jazz music turn out to be doing the same thing as Derrida all along. Later in this piece, Bhabha suggests that writers should use metonym (parts standing for wholes) instead of metaphor (words applying to things they do not literally refer to) (OF, 186). Metaphor reinforces binaries, whereas metonym subverts it.

In a reading of an artwork by conceptual artist Adrian Piper, Bhabha assumes every reader will necessarily react in a particular way. 'The viewer cannot but occupy an ambivalent, even incommensurable identification with the visible "black" history of racial victimage and the struggle against it' (ANNS, 213). This kind of monolithic projection onto readers – which is never supported by any kind of evidence – is common in Bhabha's work. The work, *Pretend*, featured historical photographs of racial oppression and resistance, with instructions to 'pretend not to know what you know' superimposed in red ink. The meaning of the work is rather ambiguous, although Piper's philosophical and political views are close to Bhabha's. It may encourage viewers to re-experience traumatic history *without* their actual knowledge of racial hierarchies, or encourage them to look at the images as if viewing them for the first time. Piper is generally more concerned with confronting white viewers with their supposed racism than with their identification with black history.



Later, a work by Elaine Reichek is said to give the 'native subjects' represented in her work as giving mobility by breaking down recognisability. As a result, 'Reichek's double consciousness splits the American dream, at its most vulnerable point' (ANNS, 214). The 'subjects' in question are shown in historical images, and presumably are long dead; presumably, their "mobility" is purely figurative. Reichek works with historical images of Native Americans, presented or juxtaposed in unusual ways. Bhabha suggests that such minoritised artworks show 'the democratic possibilities of the expression of cultural difference in a world of transnational, migratory social forces' (ANNS, 215). While clearly anti-racist in intent, her works are too abstract for any such obvious interpretation. Both

Reichek and Piper are politically oriented artists with agendas similar to Bhabha's. However, the conceptual nature of their art makes it difficult to see any direct transmission from artist or artwork to audience. It is hard to know what a racist viewer would take away from such works, if, indeed, they ever saw them to begin with.

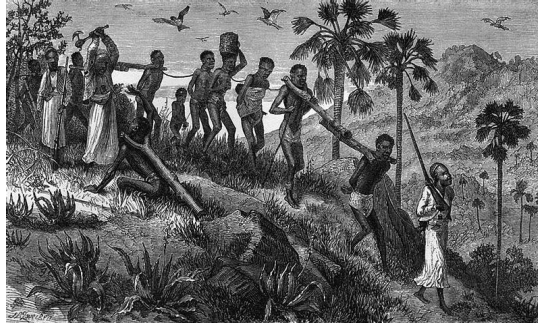
Bhabha reads the works of the Palestinian artist Emily Jacir in an almost identical way. In the work *Ramallah/New York*, Jacir puts photographs of everyday scenes in the occupied West Bank (such as someone having a haircut, or working in a delicatessen) alongside very similar scenes involving Palestinian migrants in New York. According to Bhabha, 'the spectator occupies the absent, ambivalent space of global connection' (ONO, 15). Jacir's 'purpose in making it almost impossible to *visually* decipher the difference between the locations – Ramallah, New York – is to induce an anxious undecidability in the frame of representation and the act of viewing. It is as if the “hostility” of an unhomed Palestine and the estranged hospitality of migrant New York are placed side-by-side, and subtly and suddenly cast their shadows across each other' (ONO, 16). This incites readers to commit to a 'double duty of hospitality', of 'choosing to become involved' in both sites (ONO, 17). Yet the images themselves contain no such direct moral message. Jacir seems to be emphasising the similarities in everyday life across contexts, probably to humanise the often-demonised Palestinians. The images show a kind of convivial sameness: Palestinians are not frighteningly “other”; they are regular people who have haircuts like the rest of us. This is in many ways the opposite of Bhabha's strategy of emphasising irreducible difference. It also shows how diasporas continue many everyday practices and economic structures in exile. Her work is generally about making Palestinians and their experiences and desires more visible.



When looking at texts by British writers (in his terms, “the English novel”), Bhabha's approach is somewhat different. He is not so much interested in the specific stories they tell, as the site of English/British authorial authority. English novels appear to be authoritative and transparent. But for Bhabha, they are haunted by the ambivalence of colonialism and the disavowal it involves (see below, 458-9). This emerges at moments of horror and confusion, such as E.M. Forster's account of the Marabar Caves, which only say “ou-boum” (Forster, 1994), Conrad's phrase, 'the Horror, the Horror' and the death-screch of an owl (LC, 124). For Bhabha, such moments are disturbances of the 'authoritative representations' of English literature as such. And these disturbances appear inside the text of English novels, because these novels are products of colonial hybridity. Britain in the nineteenth century was seeking a transparent representation of itself. But it could only achieve this through its colonised “other”. This problem entangled Britain in colonial structures of disavowal (see below, 454). These problems constantly return to haunt the colonial text, not only in writings by authors from colonised traditions, but also in writings by British authors (LC, 113). For Bhabha, these moments where meaning breaks down do not reflect the otherness of colonised cultures. They involve a silence or mockery arising from colonialism itself, and its inability to produce meaning (LC, 124). Colonialism is “non-sense”. It disrupts the ability to 'put the right word in the right place at the right time' (LC, 125). Whatever one says to it, it replies “ou-boum”.

In another piece, Bhabha analyses a passage from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1899/1902). Written in 1898, at the height of the “scramble for Africa”, this is an anti-colonial novel by a Polish-British author. Its protagonist, Marlow, travels to the Belgian Congo (today's Democratic Republic of Congo) to explore the unexplored, dark places on the map. He is sent to find a trader named Kurtz, who is initially portrayed as an icon of European goodness. However, Kurtz turns out to be a brutal racist. During the journey, Marlow becomes disillusioned with imperialist ideology. He returns to Europe cynical about European claims to superiority. When Kurtz dies, he utters the unexplained words, 'the horror, the horror!' However, once back in Europe, Marlow pretends that

Kurtz's last words were his lover's name. Bhabha particularly focuses on an episode where Marlow meets some African “natives” who are under attack from European gunboats. Conrad writes that 'these men could by no stretch of the imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals and the outraged law like the bursting shells had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea' (cited ONO, 8).



In the gunboat episode, Bhabha claims that Conrad's character Marlow has here 'glimpsed the Levinasian face of the other' (ONO, 8). Marlow focuses on a piece of white cloth worn by one of the Africans. He asks himself about the wearing of the cloth: 'Why? Where did he get it?' (cited ONO, 9). This question leads Marlow to reject dominant imperial beliefs. For Bhabha, the piece of cloth is 'ambiguous and enigmatic – open to question'. It is at once part of the colonial trade, and possesses unknown meanings and values assigned by the Africans (ONO, 8-9). Marlow's reaction 'goes beyond any notion of respect for the other's identity or humanity as a universal subject that has an *a priori* right to representation... In reaching out to the specific thought of the other and grappling with what is not entirely intelligible within it – rather than acknowledging an “identity” - there lies the possibility of identifying also with the unconscious of the other, and extending oneself in the direction of [the other's] unknowability as the basis' of hospitality (ONO, 9). This is a standard Derridean/Levinasian view of otherness (see above, 88-96; below, 326-30, 357-364). Elsewhere, Bhabha emphasises the dying Kurtz's utterance of 'the horror, the horror!' as exemplifying the unsayable, unassimilable otherness of colonial spaces and Bhabha's concept of the archaic (LC, 124, 212).

There are numerous difficulties with this account. First off, Conrad does not portray the Africans' view of the piece of cloth as *unknowable*, but as *unknown*. If anything is unknowable, then it is the 'law' of the colonisers as viewed by the "natives". Secondly, unknowability gives no way to offer hospitality to the other, since one has no idea how to relate to the cloth – whether, for instance, it is disrespectful to touch it. The unknowability would have to give way to knowability for this to happen. The lesson Bhabha draws is thus necessarily unrelated to the supposed point of Levinasian contact. Thirdly, Marlow is not disillusioned because he discovers something of himself in the Africans' unknowable otherness. He is disillusioned because he discovers that the *empirical claims* he previously believed about imperialism are *untrue*. He previously believed (in line with official propaganda) that Africans killed by Europeans are savages, criminals and enemies. He saw with his own eyes that this was not the case. This is similar to the idea of truth Bhabha criticises in Orwell's work (see below, 198-202).

Fourthly, Conrad's character does not identify with the unconscious of the Africans. He does not treat his own view of the cloth as the disavowed basis for their view, or as what they "really", unconsciously believe. Nor does he treat their meaning as the disavowed basis for his own, or the colonisers', view of the cloth. He presents their meanings as *absolutely incommensurable* at that present moment, with no relationship between them at the level of meaning. Fourthly, the process of "reaching out to the specific thought of the other and grappling with what is not entirely intelligible within it" is not exactly new, and does not require a Derridean/Levinasian scaffolding. This is basically what anthropologists have always done, at least since the early twentieth century. What they have *not* done – and this is Bhabha's quarrel with them – is to have essentialised the unknown as unknowable, or to have treated the unknown as the disavowed underside of their own or their cultures' identities.

Conrad's point in the gunboat passage is precisely that the two actors are *not* co-constituted. The colonisers' view of the Africans as enemies and criminals was utterly arbitrary and untrue. The colonisers' judgements are incomprehensible, an 'insoluble mystery', to the natives. These judgements come, not from the Africans' unconscious, but from a literal, absolute outside. The piece of cloth is not ambivalent in Bhabha's sense. It does not involve the dependence of self on other. (The imperial meaning of the piece of cloth, or Marlow's view of it, does not depend on the Africans' view). Also, one of the overriding themes of *Heart of Darkness* is that Europeans and Africans are not actually as different as they then seemed. This is done partly by showing a European, Kurtz, motivated by racism, acting in "savage" ways similar to those ascribed to Africans. The novel also shows that, even in its heyday, colonialism was controversial among Europeans. The theme of Europeans driven mad or savage by the horrors, savagery, or inscrutability of colonial contexts is also a staple of pro-colonial discourse (see Razack, 2004). The irony of readings such as this is that Bhabha refuses to see the very aspects of Conrad's discourse which are incommensurable with his own. He thus performatively refuses the very "otherness of the other" which he advocates.



Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (Ishiguro, 1989) also receives a brief discussion in one of Bhabha's papers. This first-person novel is narrated, mostly in retrospect, by a butler, Stevens. The novel has a number of focal points, including an unrequited attraction between Stevens and another servant. Much of the narrative focuses on Stevens' questioning of his loyalty to his aristocratic former employer (Lord Darlington). One aspect of this questioning involves Darlington's association with fascist politics in the interwar period, and Stevens' firing of two Jewish servants on Darlington's orders. This also led to Darlington's postwar disgrace, in contrast to Stevens' image of his prestige. Stevens formerly believed that his employer was so superior that his politics could not be wrong. This plays a role in his later questioning of his former ideal of dignity. Stevens' choice to forego romance out of ideals of dignity, and the eclipse of British by American world power, play similar roles in the story. Ishiguro, a Japanese migrant to Britain, is generally considered a postcolonial author. All his novels involve narrators seeking to reveal and also conceal troubling aspects of their past (Shaffer, 2008). Many of the narrators are unreliable and in denial about past events. *The Remains of the Day* challenges the servile deference and psychological repression involved in the tradition of domestic service. Some readings focus on alleged bad faith or abdication of moral responsibility by the protagonist, due to his deferential humility (Terestchenko, 2007; Atkinson, 1995).

For Bhabha, the key aspect of the novel is the contrast between naturalised class identity and the 'memory' of British anti-Semitism. The fact that some of the British ruling class were anti-Semitic and even pro-Nazi 'turns the naturalism and nationalism' exemplified in the novel by domestic service 'into the "anxiety" of the past' (ANNS, 211). Anxiety, as we shall see (below, 331-46), is a desirable emotion from Bhabha's point of view. The naturalisation of class is supposedly undone by the haunting presence of 'the Jew' as a figure at once inside and outside (ANNS, 211). This seems a rather forced reading. The Jewish characters do not play a major role in the novel. They are used to create a moral dilemma which casts doubt on Stevens' ethos of dignity and deference. It is the fact that Darlington was in retrospect clearly wrong – and not the fact that he was racist – that is

important to the plot. Furthermore, this is only one of the strands of the novel's questioning of the past. There is a clear structural similarity in Stevens' turning a blind eye to Darlington's racism, his repression of his sexual and romantic desires, and his uncritical devotion to a model of professional duty received from his father. His self-questioning should also be understood in the light of Ishiguro's other work. *A Pale View of Hills* (Ishiguro, 1982) involves the suicide of an Japanese migrant to Britain. Ishiguro is clearly less optimistic than Bhabha about the human capacity to absorb disjuncture. *An Artist of the Floating World* (Ishiguro 1986) involves similar themes to *Remains of the Day*, but focused on the legacy of Japanese fascism. Others address similar issues in personal or fantasy settings. *The Buried Giant* (Ishiguro, 2015) involves magically induced amnesia about past atrocities. While lifting the spell is necessary for protagonists' personal goals, it also leads to renewed warfare. Ishiguro's work is often ambivalent about whether the past should be unearthed or remain repressed.



In 'Doublespeak and the Minority of One', Bhabha analyses the work of George Orwell, particularly *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, 1949). The protagonist of this novel, Winston Smith, lives in a totalitarian post-apocalyptic dystopia. It is one of three permanently warring superstates. Although fictional, it models aspects of Nazism and fascism, Russia under Stalin, and 1940s Britain (the title is a reversal of the date of writing, 1948). The

adjective 'Orwellian' primarily refers to this novel. The novel also introduced many words and phrases which have entered common usage, including Thought Police, thoughtcrime, memory hole, and Big Brother. Among the features of the regime are widespread surveillance, compulsory propaganda broadcasts, a cult of personality, and the systematic rewriting of language. The new form of language, Newspeak, is simplified and entirely functional. It is designed to reduce people's capacity to think. Some of its concepts also employ "doublethink". Doublethink involves the ability to hold contradictory views at the same time, without cognitive dissonance. Examples include phrases such as 'war is peace' and 'freedom is slavery'. The idea of doublethink may be a reference to the way the word 'dialectics' was used in Stalinist language to permit apparent self-contradictions.

The protagonist, Winston Smith, is employed rewriting historical records for propaganda reasons. He is sceptical of the regime. Realising he is already a "thoughtcriminal", he begins to engage in acts of resistance such as keeping a diary and reading banned literature. He has a love affair, which is prohibited in this regime. He associates with others he believes are dissidents. However, one of them is an undercover agent. Winston is caught and tortured by the official O'Brien. O'Brien's goal is to force Winston to change his perception to conform to the regime's. O'Brien interrogates and manipulates Winston as well as torturing him physically. Winston successfully resists for some time, but is eventually broken. He betrays his lover, stops feeling passion for her, and later professes his love for the regime.

Bhabha views Orwell as rhetorically skilled. He is able to maintain the 'concrete integrity of language that ensures the integrity of the whole body' (DM1, 179). Discussing *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, Bhabha suggests he speaks from the place of 'the minority of one' (DM1, 179). This term, taken from the novel, is a challenge to Bhabha's group-based view of minority. Bhabha rejects Orwell's view of doublethink as an effect of vague or manipulative language (see below, 827-9). Instead, he argues that the kind of doublethink involved in the novel operates as a '*practice* of mental manipulation and torture' (DM1,

183), i.e. what is today often termed gaslighting. The goal of this practice is to deny the experiential reality of the “minority’s” experience. However, it also produces a kind of doubling in which the victim has a ‘faint inkling of “imagined” agency’ (DM1, 183) – doublethink in a good sense. Bhabha particularly focuses on an episode where O’Brien claims not to remember an incident which Winston believes is clearly real. O’Brien not only claims to have forgotten, but to have “forgotten the forgetting”. It is as if the event simply did not happen. For Bhabha, the problem – assuming O’Brien has *really* forgotten the events he denies – is whether Winston can also be sure that he ‘remembered, and would continue remembering’. The problem this situation raises is whether the ‘minority of one’ can ‘exist without the other’ (DM1, 184). Bhabha’s answer, of course, is that it cannot. This “minority” can only exist through a dialogical, co-constituted relationship with its other. ‘It is the dialogical process that O’Brien so desperately wants to stamp out; it is the dialogical principle that Winston equally desperately will not relinquish’ (DM1, 184).

In Orwell’s novel, belief in the ‘virtue of the minority of one’ is denounced by the totalitarian torturer as a ‘liberal disease’ (DM1, 183). This should, perhaps, be disturbingly reminiscent of Bhabha’s attacks on “liberal” views of the individual (see above, 126-8; below, Chapters 9 and 13). O’Brien tries to convince Winston that he is mad, by attacking his view that ‘clinging to truth’ and being a minority of one does not make somebody mad. O’Brien’s gaslighting forces Winston to ask questions about whether O’Brien is mad, bad, lying, and so on. For Bhabha, these are not just questions of textual interpretation, survival, or figuring out O’Brien’s ‘game plan’. ‘They are dialogical in a sense that is at once self-questioning and interlocutory; they ask us to confront our own “forgetting of the act of forgetting”; to try to work through, however imperfectly and tentatively, our own repressions and projections in order to “read” the other person’s mind’, including its repressed content (DM1, 185).

The implications of this account are somewhat ambiguous. Is Bhabha suggesting that gaslighting and torture are valuable, because they produce the affects of ambivalence he values (see below, 331-46)? He certainly seems to be drawing an analogy between O'Brien's actions and his own strategies. However, he also distances himself from O'Brien. His main point is to attack Orwell's "liberal" view of individuality and truth. For Bhabha, co-constitution is the weak spot which allows O'Brien to defeat Winston. Even in the most extreme situations of torture, Bhabha still insists that people continue to exercise power by subverting dominant meanings. Bhabha thus ignores the implications of the novel's conclusion. He suggests that the poetic force of subversion is always operative.

Several points can be made about this view of torture. One is that torture does, indeed, often have interpersonal aspects. Contrary to popular belief, torture is not about extracting information. It is not very effective in obtaining reliable information. Tortured people often say untrue things they think the torturer wants to hear. Torture is mainly about breaking down the coordinates of someone's personality. People also seek to retain some kind of resistant identity even in adversity. However, there is evidence that people who are tortured, to the point of ego-decomposition, eventually "break". They suffer a type of subjective collapse which places them outside the "language model". Bhabha's belief that people maintain agency due to the structure of language, even in the worst extremities, is not true. There are reports of people losing all social coordinates due to torture. There are also cases where people bond with captors and torturers, known as Stockholm Syndrome. This leads to the kinds of affects covered by Ishiguro, such as denial, false memory, and amnesia. In general, however, ideological changes obtained through torture are transient. Submission, even in adversity, is usually only surface-level. People do not identify with the things they are forced to do or say. However, the destruction of personalities has other effects. The main lasting effect is trauma. In some cases, people's personalities are destroyed without anything else being built (see Herman, 1997; Kassam, 2018; Scott, 1990:83-5, 109-10).

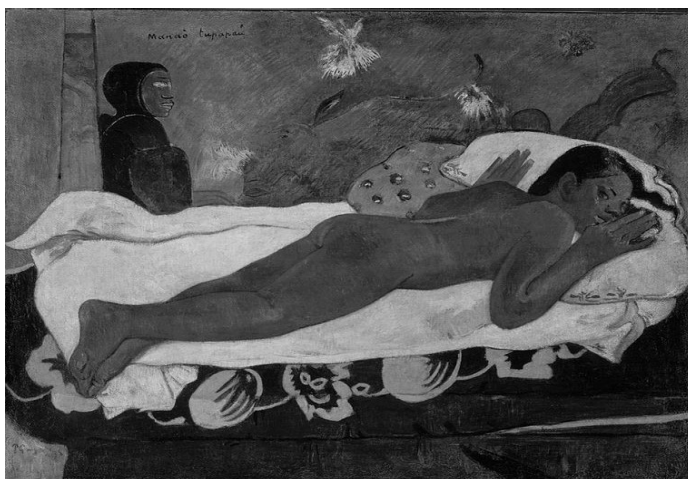


In 2011, Bhabha provided a short chapter for an introductory volume on culture. He observes – perhaps bemoans – that a 'recent change in the writing of cultural criticisms has left the prose plainer, less adorned with the props of the argument's staging'. The death of the author is no longer a scandalous claim. Words ending '-ism' and '-ality' have declined. As a result, 'the slippage and sliding of signifiers', the process of deferral which is Bhabha's key strategy, 'is disarmed'. People are instead forced to confront the idea of 'culture' directly – an idea people of Bhabha's generation thought they had already 'dissolved in the language of signifying practices and social formations' (CIB, 53). He then proceeds to rehearse his critique of multicultural diversity (see below, Chapter 9).

Beloved and the Ghosts of History

Perloff raises similar issues with Bhabha's reading of Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*. The novel (Morrison, 1987), which is highly regarded in black and postcolonial studies, involves a literal or metaphorical haunting of an African-American former slave by the ghosts of her traumatic memories, including her infanticide of her youngest daughter. Bhabha interprets the novel as being about a 'community of the unhomely' and 'seeing inwardness from the outside' (LC, 15). For Bhabha, the healing process stems from the

recognition that violence comes from signification. It is because black people are interpellated by 'projected fears, anxieties and dominations that do not originate within' themselves that their suffering is 'unspeakable' and 'unspoken'. Recognising this fact renders the unspeakable speakable, and provides a way out of the 'circle of pain' (LC, 16). In the novel, the name "124" is associated with what Bhabha calls the 'world of truth deprived of subjectivity' (LC 191, 199). This world is associated with a type of intersubjective, imaginary relation distinct from signification and meaning (see above, 121-2).



Bhabha also suggests that there is a healing process involved. Racist beliefs in black savagery grew and spread, contaminated racists and black people, drove them mad, but are finally expelled from '124' (LC, 16). Before this is possible, Sethe has to ethically reposition herself and become the subject of enunciation. From this position, she can speak the 'inside' from the 'outside' (LC, 16), entering Bhabha's beloved inbetween zone. In the context of slavery, Bhabha follows Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in arguing that infanticide is a radical act which undermines the basis of the system. It is thus the 'core psychological dynamic of all resistance' in the slave household (LC, 16). It manifests a Levinasian ethic, a 'self-love' which is also love of the 'other' (LC, 17). It leads to a distorted way of speaking, similar to Bhabha's style. Once they speak, the characters 'speak in tongues... aesthetically

distanced, held back, and yet historically framed' (LC, 17). This strangely distanced speech 'negates narrative continuity and the cacophonous comfort of words' (LC, 199). Morrison thus provides a 'narrative of an affective, historic memory of an emergent public sphere' (LC, 8). *Beloved's* presence is an example of Bhabha's 'time-lag' (LC, 199), one of the names of the inbetween space. Elsewhere, discussing 9/11, Bhabha endorses Derrida's view that healing begins with mourning. 'You come to terms with the traumatism of the event... by comprehending, interpreting, describing, speaking of and naming' (PAS, 58).

In another work, Bhabha praises Morrison for 'break[ing] the deadening prose of historical alienation' (OF, 185). This suggests that Bhabha sees direct, literal representation as alienating. It is out of sorts with the nature of reality as Bhabha sees it. It does not reflect co-constitutivity. Morrison is able to resist this process of alienation because she works with ambivalence. Hence, 'Morrison is able to transform [the] "part-objects" and metonymies of feminist *écriture* [writing], (lack, deformity and self-mutilation) into a liberationist pre-figuration of an "other" social order' (OF, 185). Bhabha also assumes that Morrison's writing somehow impacts the structure of literature itself. Because she writes this way, the power of the hegemonic way of writing is undermined.

Criticising this analysis, Perloff suggests that Bhabha produces a tendentious reading. He reads the text too quickly and unambiguously. He ignores the social context and position of the novel (Perloff, 2001:123). In some respects, Bhabha seems to be closer to the core themes of *Beloved* than he is to those of *Fish Story*. *Beloved* is clearly intended to be, and is usually read as, a story about traumatic memories of slavery and their impact on black Americans. However, Bhabha seems to mix together the different stages of trauma and recovery – the language-shattering impact of traumatic memories, the displacement and time-lag resulting from these memories, the emergence of speech, and the reconstruction of community. Symptoms of trauma and aspects of healing are melded together, as if they are all part of the same process of disrupting dominant meanings.

If *Beloved* is a metaphor for post-traumatic stress, Bhabha's reading effectively values and glorifies the effects of trauma. Bhabha is largely uninterested in the subjective effects of trauma on the participants. He does not discuss mother-daughter relationships. He seems, unlike Morrison, to value the disruptive effects of trauma, the ways it 'haunts' language. Similarly, if *Beloved* is based on revaluing black identity, this is strangely downplayed in Bhabha's account. And if it involves the background functioning of African cosmologies, this is also invisible to Bhabha. That the ghost and its spiteful force are stand-ins for racist signification is also questionable.



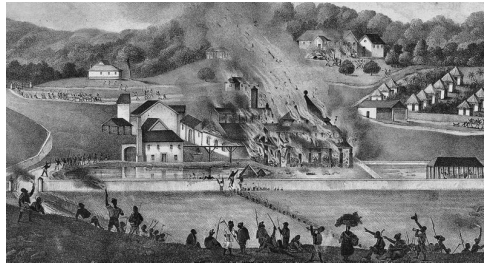
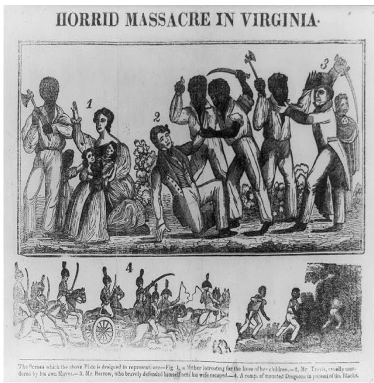
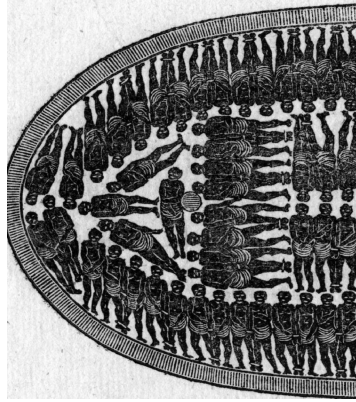
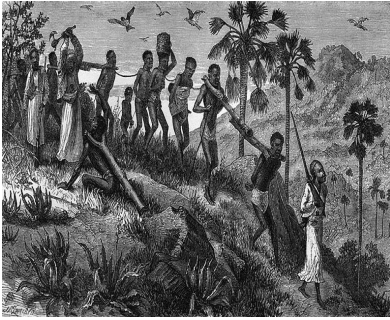
Morrison's approach, unlike Bhabha's, is relatively conventional in its view of trauma and healing. As Sethe and her daughter Denver deal with the traumatic memories, they reconnect with social life and enter into conventional (romantic, work) relationships. The traumatic, extra-linguistic memory is successfully processed and becomes part of normal, linguistic memory. At this point, the characters are no longer in the inbetween zone. They are back in the zone of normal social functioning. One might say, in Bhabha's terms, that they recompose their egos and their sense of clear categories. Whether one agrees with Bhabha or with Morrison on the significance of trauma, their views are distinct. Bhabha has once more reduced someone else's voice to his own.

Bhabha later changes the meaning of his own reading. While recognising that infanticide arose from desperation, Bhabha denies that Morrison treats it this way. 'Morrison could easily have written a narrative that made Sethe, the slave mother, a heroine who liberated her child through death', from a future of slavery. Instead she 'brilliantly refuses to do this'. The child still cannot understand why her mother killed her. She returns with a vengeance. This turns the situation into a 'complex' one of 'ethical choices'. It thus posits a 'very difficult freedom'. People are meant to identify as agents even when they only have bad choices. They are not meant to blame circumstances. Bhabha thinks that Morrison suggests that 'it is only when the victims begin to question their own acts, even if those acts were performed in and provoked by an unfair system like slavery, that they can find their agency and indeed their freedom' (MGM, 164-5). In other words, the important point for Bhabha is a kind of infinite existential freedom and responsibility. Sethe's problem is similar to the "trolley problems" of analytical philosophy - fictional scenarios where every possible action ends in harm. In analytical philosophy, it is usually assumed that there is nonetheless a right choice which precludes guilt. For Bhabha, there is no right way to solve these problems. People are always free to choose, and always responsible for the resultant, unavoidable harms. One ends up in situations where innocence is impossible - one is guilty whatever one does.

This is in accord with Levinasian ethics (see above, 95-7; below, 683-694). It is arguably how people respond emotionally to traumatic situations where they lose the sense of agency. It is also consistent with neoliberal responsibilisation. It has been a mantra of mainstream politics since the 1980s that poor and oppressed people need to take responsibility for their lives, instead of blaming "society". People are meant to "own" their problems and exercise "agency" and "accountability" - regardless of whether they *really* caused the problems or not, and even whether they have free will or not. This mantra has underpinned disempowering discourses of self-blame and stigma management (see Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). It has led to a barbaric expansions of criminalisation to

cover issues such as poverty, psychological difference, addiction, and unintended consequences. The results are Kafkaesque. This process is justified partly by false beliefs about the causes of social problems and social decline. It is partly a way for the rich to blame the poor. But there is also an undeniable libidinal hook in making people feel freer, and more responsible, than they are. It gives people a sense of power over their lives, even as they are thrown around by forces outside their control. And it lets people take out frustrations with social problems on "irresponsible" others, instead of looking at socioeconomic structures. In contrast, socialist politics has historically focused on social causes of social problems. Socialism has resisted the downward displacement of blame for social problems. And existentialism, followed through consistently, leads to a position like Stirner's (2017) or Bonanno's (1977). Existential freedom negates the moral force of external power.





Slavery is a persistent historical trauma. Images, from top left: contemporary depiction of the capture and murder of slaves in the Congo; depiction of a ship carrying enslaved Africans, in horrifically cramped conditions (many did not survive the journey); contemporary newspaper coverage of a slave uprising, focusing on alleged massacres of slave-owners; and a depiction of the destruction of an owner's mansion during a revolt.

In the Margins: Toni Morrison's Beloved

Toni Morrison is a black American author. *Beloved* is her best-known novel. It was written in 1987. It is set over a hundred years earlier, in the time after the American Civil War (1861-65). The causes of the civil war are debated, but some scholars see it as a war about slavery. Most black people in Southern America were owned as slaves by a minority of rich white people. (Most Southern whites never owned slaves). There is debate over whether slavery reflected a racist structure of American settler-colonialism from its origins, or whether it was a later response intended to divide-and-rule working-class movements. Many enslaved black Americans worked on huge cotton plantations, which were central to the Southern American economy.

American political power was (and is) distributed at multiple levels, with strong local states as well as a federal government. When the federal government sought to limit slavery, some of the Southern states declared independence. Supporters of the South see the civil war as mainly a war about states' rights, relative to the federal government. Some Marxists see it as an economic conflict between aristocratic plantation-owners and Northern capitalists, workers and farmers. But at the time, most people thought the war was about abolishing slavery. During the civil war, the North won the allegiance of many black Americans by promising to abolish slavery. The North won the war and slavery was abolished. But many Southern white Americans were horrified at their defeat and the freeing of the slaves. During the Reconstruction Era (1863-1877), the victorious North sought to rebuild the devastated South. It also sought to protect the civil rights of newly freed black people. After federal troops were withdrawn in 1877, racist Southern whites disenfranchised blacks and created an apartheid-like system of racial segregation known as 'Jim Crow'. Backed by local political power, capture of the policing and legal systems, and terror tactics such as lynchings, this regime survived until the 1960s.

Beloved is based loosely on the true story of Margaret (“Peggy”) Garner. In 1856, before the civil war, Garner, who had also been repeatedly raped, escaped from slavery with her husband and children. They fled from Kentucky, which allowed slavery, to Ohio, which did not. Escape to the North had previously destabilised slavery in some of the Southern states. The Fugitive Slave Act, passed in 1850, forced Northern states which did not themselves allow slavery to capture and return escaped slaves. Garner's family were caught and besieged by armed government forces. Rather than allow her newborn child to be enslaved, Garner killed the child. Slavery opponents argued that she was trying to protect the child from enslavement, brutality and rape. Garner sought unsuccessfully to avoid being returned to the plantation by instead being tried for murder in Ohio. Unlike Morrison's protagonist, Garner died before the civil war.

Garner's case was not unique. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (a white conservative feminist historian) found evidence that infanticide was relatively common as a form of resistance among enslaved women. By killing babies – considered the property of the slave-owner – women believed they were reclaiming the child as their own, and striking back at the slave-owners. They also showed the hypocrisy of slave-owners' paternalistic views of the family. She observes that this only usually happened when owners failed to live up to their end of an implied paternalistic ideal. Such serious crimes also had the paradoxical effect of giving slaves legal standing (Fox-Genovese, 1988).

In *Beloved*, the main character, Sethe, and her family moved to Ohio after the civil war. Their house, known as 124, is haunted by the ghost of a woman named Beloved. The ghost is angry and spiteful. It throws objects around, and brings misfortune. Two sons run away from home. Sethe's daughter is housebound and shy. Her mother-in-law dies. Another former slave, Paul D, tries to exorcise the ghost. He tells the family to forget the past and have a



sense of reality. But the ghost apparently manifests as a young woman. (Some readers suggest that *Beloved* is not really a ghost, and the story is really about misrecognition). She charms Sethe and chases off Paul D. Then the ghost and Paul D have sex, and Paul D is overwhelmed with traumatic memories. Paul D tries to start a family with Sethe, and resist *Beloved*. But his workmates reject Sethe. At this point, it emerges that the main character, Sethe, had earlier fled from Kentucky to Ohio to escape slavery, in 1856. Like Margaret Garner, she was caught, and killed her youngest daughter to keep her 'safe' from slavery. On learning this, Paul D is overwhelmed and leaves. After this point, reality and the forward movement of time collapse. Out of guilt, Sethe spends her money to appease *Beloved*. But *Beloved* becomes more and more angry and demanding. Sethe stops eating, while *Beloved* grows and grows. Sethe's daughter seeks help in the community. In a flashback, Sethe attacks a white man who she mistakes for her former owner. After this, *Beloved* disappears. Paul D returns and is still in love with Sethe. Sethe's daughter becomes a well-functioning worker.

The story is often read as a story about the psychological effects of slavery. Slaves often suffered horrific, traumatic violence at the hands of white owners and overseers. Traumatic experiences included rapes, torture, beatings and whippings, and witnessing killings. Former slaves often showed symptoms of what would today be called post-traumatic stress. They tried to suppress their memories or dissociate from them. But this response to trauma can lead to a fragmentation or loss of self. Healing from trauma is often seen in terms of recalling, reorganising and integrating traumatic memories so as to rebuild a unified sense of self (e.g. Herman, 1997). Some scholars interpret *Beloved* as a healing story of this kind (Bowers, 1990; Rushdy, 1997; Krumholz, 1992). However, other accounts suggest that the story transmits, rather than healing, trauma (Matus, 1998). In a sense, it suggests that trauma cannot be healed. *Beloved* stands for the trauma which keeps returning and frustrating the desire to either forget or narrate the past.

Other accounts focus on Sethe's wounded motherhood. She has been traumatised because she could not protect her children, and her breast milk was also stolen by the enslavers. As a result, she neglects her own needs and overprotects her daughter – who struggles to emerge as a distinct self (Schapiro, 1991; Demetrakopoulos, 1992). Morrison's work is also often interpreted as affirming African-American lives, experiences, and histories. Morrison challenges the portrayal of black people in negative and passive terms. Instead, she portrays blackness as 'affirmation, presence, and good' (Powell and Middleton, 1997; c.f. Mason, 1990). Suero Elliott (2000) suggests that the novel involves a constant struggle against internalising the 'commodified' view of the self as a slave. Against definitions by others as commodities, black people struggled to develop self-empowered subjectivity. Some readers also suggest that Morrison's novels are framed by African practices and belief-systems. She usually writes about places where African beliefs are not entirely suppressed. They persist, if only as unconscious forces (Jennings, 2008). A returning spirit can have a literal meaning in African cosmologies. The relationship between the human world and the world of the dead is sometimes conceived as cyclical. People die and are reborn in one world and then the other. Ancestors have powers to intervene in the human world. Ritual practices smooth the transition from dangerous corpse to sacred ancestor. Spirits which have not received proper funerals or are otherwise troubled (including murder victims) may haunt the living as destructive ghosts. These ideas are very different from Bhabha's "time-lag". In contrast, Parker (2001) suggests that Morrison's characters are hysterics, who use a bodily discourse to express unspeakable experiences. Many of the aspects Bhabha takes as showing disjunction, are for Parker signs of hysteria. And, as in Freudian accounts of hysteria, the symptom (the ghost) vanishes when memory is achieved – although not completely.

Inversion and Subversion

Bhabha, in common with most poststructuralists, focuses on dismantling binary categories. In the dominant system, identities and differences are usually constructed through a *binary logic* (also known as 'dualism' or 'dualisms'). In a binary logic, categories are defined through the exclusion of their opposite – for example, self and other, black and white, male and female (LC, 3; see above, 81-3). A pairing of words in such a construction (e.g. male-female) can be referred to as 'a binary' (or 'a dualism'). In common with many poststructuralists, Bhabha shows a strong aversion to binaries. This aversion is ambiguous, however, because he also suggests that the basic structures of language and identity are binary. For most poststructuralists, binaries are both structurally necessary and politically problematic. On a Saussurean view (see above, 88-96), all language functions through binaries. Since binaries are basic to language – and our identity, subjectivity, and sense of reality are effects of language – then binaries cannot be eliminated. However, they can be made visible, shown to be constructed and contingent, and disrupted in their functioning. Categories of oppression seem to be particularly sharply binarised. This arguably contributes to their oppressive force. Cultural works can display and reinforce, or else transgress and subvert these binaries. Polarities are themselves to be resisted (OF, 181).

Radical effects come from the transgression and subversion of binaries. For instance, according to Bhabha, Foucault's productivity comes from his rejection of essence/appearance or ideology/science binaries (LC, 72). Bhabha seeks to do the same with categories of colonial power. Transgression or subversion is very different from the usual, antagonistic approach to oppression – where an oppressed group overthrows an oppressor. Bhabha argues against positions which simply *invert* categories such as oppressor-oppressed, coloniser-colonised or black-white – positions in which, for instance, the oppressed fight the oppressors and take power from them (LC, 19).

Revolutionary ideologies such as Marxism, pan-Africanism, black nationalism, and radical feminism are inversion rather than subversion from Bhabha's point of view. According to him, such approaches actually reproduce the binary opposition which is the real source of oppression. However, Bhabha's focus on linguistic strategy also contains an implicit antagonistic element (see below, 274-6). In a passive-aggressive way, Bhabha seems to need to disavow the antagonism inherent in his own position. This is necessary to sustain his simultaneous embrace of and resistance to binaries. Subversion is 'interruptive' (LC, 191). It is a process of renegotiating the place of intersubjective co-constitution, 'a closure that is not conclusion but a liminal [i.e. inbetween] interrogation outside the sentence [i.e. outside structured knowledge]' (LC, 191). Bhabha approvingly cites Judith Butler's account of performativity as a type of agency exercised 'not outside or beyond the reinscription or reiteration', i.e. the process of linguistic deferral, but in its very 'modality and effects' (ANNS, 212).

Subversion, interruption, and negotiation are largely interchangeable in Bhabha's personal vocabulary. They take place, not 'outside or beyond', but 'in the very modality and effects' of one's reinscription in the dominant order (LC, 219). They are associated with the Lacanian sphere of the Imaginary, the 'symbol', and their disruptive effects on language, which create space for social change (see below, Chapter 15). They exploit a gap Bhabha believes exists between the general system and the particular moment of action or performance. There is a gap within modernity (and colonialism) between the pedagogical moment (the values supposedly promoted) and the moment of performance, which is racist and "archaic" (LC, 244). This is an example of the general paradox of subject-formation. It creates space for internal subversion of the system. Modernity can be subverted through its 'enunciation', its expression in particular acts (LC, 242). It can be subverted from the position of the supplement, "'outside" or uncannily beside' (LC, 243), but also co-constitutive with it, and this 'within modernity' (LC, 245). Subversion is about ruptures, breaks, gaps, and "caesuras", not flows. 'It is the function of the *lag* to slow down the linear, progressive time of modernity... This can only be achieved... by jamming the

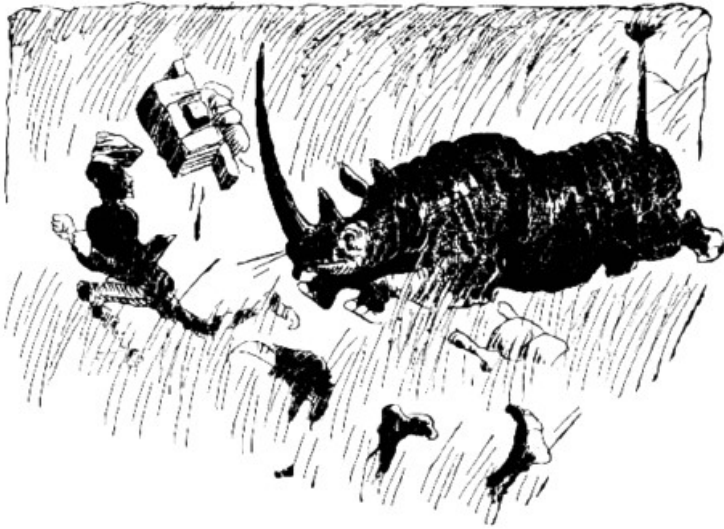
stream of real life, by bringing the flow to a standstill in a reflux of astonishment' (LC, 253). Radical action is anti-production, not production.



In Bhabha's personal language, “interruption” is similar to subversion. Bhabha defines the word in relation to Brechtian theatrical practices of estrangement. Brecht often used techniques which “break the fourth wall” or otherwise undermine the imaginary immersion of the audience in his plays. Bhabha spins this as a way to 'dispel the audience's enchantment with theatrical naturalism and ideological normalisation'. His type of politics is designed to similarly “interrupt” dominant discourses such as the ideas of equality and universality (ONO, 14). “Interruption” in this sense does not necessarily mean that the process is stopped. It means that the appearance of smooth, natural functioning is disrupted. The workings of the system are put on display. The ideological coordinates of the fantasy-level of the situation – not its pragmatic ways of functioning – are undermined.

From Bhabha's perspective, inversion is one of the various traps laid by hegemonic power to capture its enemies. For Bhabha, any counter-hegemonic discourse which starts from an 'adversarial authority' – for example, a workers' revolution, a feminist struggle against

patriarchy, an anarchist struggle against the state, or an anti-colonial struggle against imperialism – necessarily falls into this trap. It reproduces (but inverts) a binary, and it establishes a point of authority which paradoxically reproduces the political and epistemological power of its adversary (LC, 22). Bhabha prefers resistance to avoid absolute alternatives. Instead, it should be creative and agonistic. Its relationship with the dominant system should be open and dialogical (Huddart, 2006:70). He celebrates the 'subversive, messy mask of camouflage' and denounces the 'pure avenging angel speaking the truth', or any position of pure opposition (LC, 26). He opposes the idea that there can be any clear representative relationship between political representatives and those they claim to represent. On this basis, he opposes all forms of separatist politics, 'moralism', supposedly 'organic' political objectives, and articulation of political principles (LC, 27-8).



Bhabha particularly opposes any kind of explicit aggression or anger. These are identified with the 'Imaginary' and the attempt to create an illusion of a full, self-present self (LC, 77). Instead, Bhabha seeks a kind of strategy which does not confront the opposing argument. Instead it withholds the 'objective' or referent of the other's discourse. It 'interrogates' the discourse (LC, 155) at the level of the utterance rather than the statement. It resists the other person's pursuit of knowledge and clarity by speaking from

the position of the other person's disavowed other. It is similar to the role of the analyst in Lacanian psychoanalysis (LC, 162). For example, it resists providing clear meaning (see above, 35-7) and refuses the object-status assigned to the speaker (see above, 134 and below, Chapter 7). Bhabha's position arguably leads to a reformist type of politics (see below, Chapters 12 and 15). And there is a recurring problem that he often enacts the splitting, (passive-)aggressive affects he rejects (see below, 251-8, 264-8, 274-6).

It might be helpful to think of Bhabha's concept of inversion as akin to the idea of reverse racism or reverse sexism. It's not quite the same because Bhabha also recognises a structural difference between the reverse and the original form. Instead of calling something reverse racist or reverse sexist, Bhabha calls it an inversion. Inversion isn't as bad as colonialism or racism, but it's also undesirable from Bhabha's point of view. It might also be helpful to think of Stalinism and Maoism as systems in which an inverted conception was put in place. For instance, the Maoist good, middling and bad class categories which privileged former outgroups. Under Maoism, the ex-capitalists and landlords and their descendants belonged to the lowest, most discriminated-against group. Workers and peasants usually belonged to the highest group. The former hierarchy was turned upside-down.

Bhabha's rejection of inversion is typical of the association of metanarratives (big overarching accounts of the world), oppression, and totalitarianism which has been common in poststructuralism since the 1980s. Bhabha argues that ideologies based on fixed categories, which identify strongly with binaries, necessarily lead to atrocities against out-groups and inbetween groups. He uses historical cases, such as ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, as evidence for this claim (LC, 5). However, there is an important difference between recognising that genocides and atrocities usually stem from binarising politics, and arguing that binarising politics *always, as such* leads to atrocities. Bhabha seems to use the former claim as evidence for the latter. Radical antagonistic politics must be avoided because it does not overthrow oppression – it entrenches oppression.

This position explains why authoritarian neo-Marxists, such as Slavoj Žižek, see postcolonial theory as liberal (Žižek, 2001). Žižek believes that the Derridean play of signifiers leaves the organisation of the social order – its trunk – intact. Theorists like Bhabha refuse to pass to an “Act” of rejecting the present and founding a new order. They therefore limit themselves to small gestures around the edges of capitalism and colonialism, which leave its structure in place. Bhabha denies that his approach amounts to 'assimilation' or 'collaboration'. Instead, he says, it is a kind of 'interstitial agency' (CIB, 58), agency in the inbetween space.



Bhabha also uses the terms 'negotiation' (in the inbetween space) and 'negation' in a similar sense (LC, 25). 'Negation' means the same as 'inversion'. Whereas 'negation' works through the binary and reinforces it, 'negotiation' transgresses it. Negotiation replaces the older concept of negation in Bhabha's version of critical theory. Negation is an important category for earlier critical theorists. In Hegel and Marx, later processes negate or overcome those which go before. Newness comes from negation. In Bhabha, in contrast, newness comes from negotiation. Negotiation, or translation, here means the process of deferring and reinflecting meanings (Buden, 2006). Change does not happen through clashes between antagonistic forces. Instead, it happens through the transgression of limits and reconstruction of terms.

According to Boris Buden (2006), negotiation is a non-violent, democratic process. I feel it might better be termed reformist. The terms of the dominant discourse are retained, rather than left behind. The violence of the system thus carries on as usual. Bhabha recognises that the circulation of signs today is largely top-down, from North to South (LC, 20). However, he still uses a model of negotiation of signs. Elsewhere, Bhabha argues for a language which is 'iterative' (repetitive, based on deferral) rather than 'imperative' (forceful, commanding), 'translational' rather than 'transcendental'. The point isn't to oppose the norm, but to reveal the alterity already operating within it (MM, 437). While Bhabha's crude dismissals of opposing positions belie this aesthetic preference, it explains aspects of his method – particularly the frustratingly repetitive nature of his work.



Instead of inversion, Bhabha proposes 'subversion' or 'transgression' of binaries. Subversion happens to the extent that the two terms of a binary are *not* kept separate, but merged and hybridised. It happens when a space of 'translation' or inbetweenness or ambiguity, between the terms is created (LC, 25). Subversion creates a space, and an identity or object, which is neither one thing nor the other (LC, 25). This ambivalence disrupts the binary. It brings together contradictory or antagonistic elements (LC, 25). These elements are neither one thing nor the other, but something else besides (LC, 28). For Bhabha, this inbetween space is the space where oppressive structures are undermined. It is also the space where new forms of life become possible. For instance, instead of anti-colonial violence, a 'subversion' might involve a text which juxtaposes the unavoidably different views of coloniser and colonised. Or it might be achieved by a text

which creates a third term of a person who is both coloniser and colonised. Instead of women's liberation, a 'subversion' might involve the adoption of third-gender identities and pronouns. Or it might involve men 'acting like women' and vice-versa. This kind of subversion is common in radical cultural politics today.

In critical theory – which for Bhabha, is the most vital field of struggle – an effective critique is not one which keeps binarised terms separate, but one which overcomes them by bringing them together (LC, 25). Bhabha's alternative to textual antagonism is to create texts where black and white 'come alive in a shared text' which is never entirely one or the other. Such a text brings language into the inbetween space (WS, 24). At one point, Bhabha actually claims that agency is *only possible* when working in inbetween spaces which are partly inside the dominant system (HH, 12). This makes sense in terms of the assumption that agency is a side-effect of the place of the 'subject' as a void in the structure (see above, 88-96, 326). However, it is problematic, because it does not reflect experiences of agency. It is possible to radically reject the dominant system and yet still feel oneself to be an agent. Indeed, people who adopt a position of radical antagonism may feel themselves to be agents *for the first time* (see Wood, 2001). This seems to falsify Bhabha's analysis of agency, and by extension, the analysis of subject-formation on which it is based. Since people can remain agents without embracing (however tentatively) the social system, it therefore follows that there is more to agency than the gesture of occupying the place of ambiguity.

CHAPTER 4

Difficulties with Bhabha's Constructivism

Colonialism and Interpellations: Some Limits to Bhabha's Approach

As seen in Chapter 2, Bhabha assumes that 'interpellation' – the social construction of people's identities and sense of who they are – is always or usually effective. He writes as if we *are* what we are *seen or represented as*. For example, 'Black citizens are fixed as dyes in the personae of stereotypes whose persecutory force creates a sense of social death... [in a climate where] the racialized person is seen as a threat, an infection, a symptom of social decline' (RF, xix). Put in plain English, Bhabha is here saying that black people are seen (in the social text) as dangerous. Because of this, they are treated as – and feel – 'socially dead', or excluded. It is true that black people suffer persecution and exclusion ('social death') because of racist stereotypes. However, Bhabha is going beyond this trivial claim. He is saying that black citizens *are* these stereotypes. Black people are forced to be dangerous, disruptive, and so on, because they are interpellated this way. They aren't simply represented or even treated this way. The social text is determinant of identity and of our contingent nature. The possibility of a gap between white racists' views of black citizens, and their identity or social relations at a concrete level, is elided in this passage. If black citizens are *seen as* dangerous and socially dead, then they *are* dangerous and socially dead. In sociological accounts, the process of internalising or rejecting outer labels and categories is far more contingent. There is some evidence that people tend to identify with labels (Lemert, 1967). Yet there is also some degree of autonomy of the micro-social level in relation to dominant social stereotypes. Marginalised people often create meanings among themselves which defy dominant representations. This is implicitly denied in Bhabha's theory. As we shall see (Chapters 7-8), this has fundamental effects on his theory of resistance.

To take another example, suppose colonial settlers encounter a group of hunter-gatherers who have never encountered colonisers before. The settlers will make sense of the hunter-gatherers through their own pre-existing categories, for example as 'wild men'. The 'wild man' stereotype existed in European culture before contact with hunter-gatherers outside Europe, and was projected onto any hunter-gatherers Europeans encountered. But in reality, the hunter-gatherers will come to see *themselves* in these terms only to the extent that they actually accept the way they are seen, that the interpellation is effective (or else, coincides with existing self-perceptions). Indeed, they might have their own, completely different set of self-other categories through which they see and 'interpellate' the settlers: as strange, alienated, divine, 'stripped' and desituated, devils, and so on (see Burman, 2009, 2010). There is, at the very least, a power-conflict over which side gets to interpellate the other – if, indeed, interpellation succeeds on either side. Postcolonial theory thus struggles to deal with cases where differences pre-exist contact, rather than being effects of mutual self-other construction. This is very important, since most colonial situations actually began as contact between established social groups which were not necessarily locked in a self-other binary.



The fact that interpellation sometimes fails gives pause for thought in the analysis of colonialism. Ethnocentrism, or seeing the world through the categories of one's own culture, is by no means unique to modern Europeans. Many indigenous groups name themselves with a term which also means 'people', implicitly excluding group outsiders from their view of humanity. Other states and empires are also ethnocentric. The Tokugawa shogunate in Japan saw European culture as a dangerous, destabilising influence. Only after the Meiji Restoration did Japan seek to hybridise western culture. Chinese culture is historically ethnocentric, viewing China as the centre of the world and people beyond its borders as barbarians (Chan, 2013). However, when European traders and colonisers arrived in China, they were not successfully “interpellated” as inferior barbarians, or successfully “civilised” into mimicking Chinese norms. Rather, the choice among the contending European and Chinese ethnocentrisms was decided by war – and China suffered a century of historical trauma. China's inability to maintain its superiority over “barbarians” was one of the aspects of this trauma (see Hevla, 2003). When Spanish colonisers arrived in what is now Mexico, various coincidences of iconography led some Aztecs to see them as a second coming of the god Quetzalcoatl. Yet the colonisers never came to see *themselves* as such. As Sahlins (1981) shows, there are traditions in many cultures where foreign rulers are perceived as having attributes and powers derived from the local culture's perception of otherness – for instance, as beings from the divine realm. Locals may accept and even encourage foreign rulers, attempting to capture their mystical, alien power. Again, colonisers are unlikely to internalise such interpellations.

Power seems to be a major factor in explaining whether interpellations take root or not. In most cases, European colonisers either manipulated local perceptions to seize power, or overrode them by force. In other cases, however, Europeans felt compelled by local power-relations or their own designs to give at least an outer appearance of conforming to local expectations. For example, early representatives of the East India Company adopted symbolism and sought local titles taken from the Indian diplomatic system. Early settlers, known as *nabobs*, assimilated into Indian culture, albeit at its elite level. Orwell (1936)

famously shows how colonial officials were sometimes pressured into conforming to local expectations of them. In pre-capitalist empires, it was arguably more common for invaders to be successfully interpellated into established local cultures and leadership roles than for invaders to change the local culture. For example, Chinese emperors had different titles and powers in different parts of the empire. These cases further “provincialise” Bhabha's account. European colonialism is *unusual* in creating effective, often one-way interpellations from the outside in, meaning that European ethnocentrism did greater harm than its forerunners. This unusual degree of power is simply assumed in the language model of colonialism, when it needs to be explained.



These examples suggest that colonialism is not exclusively a linguistic construct. Colonialism does not occur in all the historical cases where one group treats another as its co-constituted 'other'. Ethnocentrism cannot explain colonialism, because many cultures are ethnocentric. It is only because of the power-advantages of capitalist technology, economics, and military power that certain countries' ethnocentrism became a global form of oppression. This conclusion also problematises the use of linguistic subversion as an anti-colonial practice. A less-powerful culture may reinfect dominant symbols with its own meanings, but these new meanings and 'counter-interpellations' may continue to lack structural power. For example, it is the coloniser's understanding of an ambiguous treaty which the colonial courts will enforce. Alternatively, the new interpretations may rely

covertly on colonial power for their own social force. Reinterpretations are only effective when they are backed by social power – even if only the diffuse social power of a 'hidden transcript' and of small everyday resistance practices (see below, 504-17).

Bhabha's assumption that interpellation succeeds is typical of Anglophone Derridean/Lacanian approaches. In these approaches, the social text is seen as totalising and inescapable, there is 'no outside', and identity is a secondary effect of social interpellation or *che vuoi*. (However, on a strict Lacanian and/or Althusserian model, interpellation is *not* always effective, and in fact, is never entirely effective). Two side-effects stem from this short-circuit. Firstly, stereotypes are assumed – dangerously – to be *true* (see above, 138, 218-19). Secondly, undue emphasis is placed on changing *representations*, on the assumption that, if (say) black citizens no longer appear in films or novels as threatening and dangerous, they will cease to be *treated as* such in society, and will also cease to *be* threatening and dangerous (as Bhabha assumes they are). This ignores the fact that a power-regime can also create cultural texts which disguise and conceal the actual operation of power. For example, Hollywood often depicts racial equality in movies, as part of a pretence that racial equality actually exists and society is 'post-racial'. This may serve to trick white viewers into believing there is no longer racial inequality. Another problem is that, if all meaning is ambivalent, there is no basis for being sure the 'other' even exists, let alone the deep structures of language Bhabha discusses. Bhabha somehow manages to perform a certainty which his literal claims undermine.

There is more to Bhabha's position than simply social constructivism and anti-essentialism. As discussed above, Bhabha is a strong constructivist. In other words, he does not simply maintain that some categories are socially constructed, whereas others are not. He maintains that *everything* – the entire social world, people's identities, experiences, bodies, desires and needs, the natural and physical world – is an effect of (or at least experienced exclusively through) social categories. He also treats all social categories, in practice if not in theory, as *linguistic* categories. And he theorises linguistic categories in a

structuralist way – as binary structures in which meanings are defined through the oppositions of concepts, not in reference to any external object.

It follows from this that any transformative political act must take place through linguistic categories. There is *no outside* to these categories, which are usually treated, in structuralist fashion, as an almost-closed, unitary totality. (I say almost-closed, because the exception of internal ambivalence or incompleteness is always available to allow for some degree of openness). Any transformation can only involve small changes in the existing structure. These gradual changes always pass through the reconfiguration of concepts. Other kinds of political practice are dismissed on principle. Any belief that politics can flow from desire (as in Deleuze and Stirner), from an underlying Self (as in Jung and Sartre), or from humanity or a human essence (as in the early Marx) are dismissed as hopelessly essentialist and naïve. As we shall see (Chapters 12 and 15), the resulting politics tend to be reformist, partial and gradual, even while using a language of radicalism and transgression.



Another type of political significance arises from Bhabha's rejection of autonomous subjectivity. Bhabha opposes any idea of an inner self, which is not reducible to social construction. This has the effect of destroying the primary basis for autonomy, critique, and an 'outside'. Resistance and social movements cannot, then, be understood in terms of actors responding to oppressive social conditions which violate something prior to this

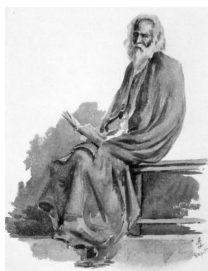
oppression. They have to be understood as mutations *within* the social text itself. This might seem liberating at first glance. It destroys fallacies such as rational choice theory and class-interest reductionism. However, it has the effect of tying its adherents irreducibly into the dominant social 'text' or system. Not only *are* they irreducibly inside, but they and everyone else *must* already be inside - no matter how alienated, excluded or antagonistic towards the system they feel or appear or act. What's more, any change in the system must come from its steady displacement, and not from its replacement with some other discourse or 'text'. Attempts at autonomy are *a priori* misguided and unsuccessful. This position leads to a refusal of the claim that there is an existential choice to capitulate to the system or to fight against it (for examples of this claim, see Bey, 1996; Bonanno, 1977, 1996). It thus reinforces the system's command that everyone should aspire to succeed, or at least survive, on its own terms. In insisting that there is no outside, it helps the system to create in practice a world without an outside.

If alienation is caused by conceptual binaries – which either cause or misrepresent the outer world – then struggle in the outer world is irrelevant to liberation (except to the extent that it causes conceptual shifts). The point is to stop using binaries and enter into a state of consciousness beyond them. (It would also seem necessary that others do similarly for the gesture to have a social effect, although Bhabha rarely considers this). Bhabha seems to think that binaries are constitutive of language, and so cannot actually be overcome, only rendered less effective. But even if his theory is radicalised past this point, and the reader assumes binaries can be destroyed, it still treats the overcoming of binaries as the most effective anti-oppressive strategy.

This depends, however, on a particular ontological view of the origins of oppression. If oppression exists in outer social relations and not primarily in concepts or in co-constitutive, interior self-other relations, Bhabha's approach simply scratches the surface. It also opens up a means for radical claims to be recuperated or blunted. The system often gives representational concessions (such as alterations in the wording of laws, or inclusion

of members of particular groups in the Cabinet or Administration, or recognition of opponents in academia or the media) in place of substantive alterations in social conditions. Minority art can even be used as part of a process of gentrification of poorer areas. In effect, postcolonial theory might provide the basis for colonialism with a human face, rather than decolonisation.

This position leads to the foreclosure of various alternatives. Most obviously, it rejects the idea that people have self-evident identities which always appear in society – for instance, that we are all economically rational individuals, or we all act on our class interests. (It subtly reintroduces this idea, however, in its treatment of positionality – see above, 139-50). It also seems to reject the idea that structural positions can be reconstructed through experiences (for instance, feminist consciousness-raising), and the idea that identities can be formed on the basis of desire. It leads to a blockage of decisive politics based on taking a side within binaries – precluding decisive anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian politics, as well as decisive colonial and authoritarian politics.



The role of the theorist is also a problem given that ambivalence exists whether it is theorised or not. So why do we need theorists like Bhabha to show us that it exists, or to leverage it politically? A logical contradiction has been pointed out, in which, since language is always split and equivocal, the agency of the critic, artist or social actor is unnecessary (Parry, 2004:61). Thus, Bhabha celebrates resistance which seems to be beside the point. I think this misunderstands the underlying ontology involved. If Bhabha, following Derrida, believes that reality is a holistic, immanent field, and separations within it are illusory, then individual actions are not really self-authored, and can also be instances

of processes in the structural field. Individual actions can thus unknowingly express the textual workings of ambivalence. It's similar to the idea that God, Providence, or History realises its will through the actions of individuals, even if they don't intend or realise it. Action is thus important, but is not really self-authored. It is action of the holistic field, through the individual.

Is Everything Structured like a Language?

While I am sympathetic to constructivism, I believe Bhabha's approach is too totalising. Even if everything is textual, there are always alternatives to any particular text. One can get outside a particular text simply by getting inside a different text. A poststructuralist can argue that a work by Shakespeare or Dickens is not a closed text. Their texts are intertextual, containing remnants from other texts. They can be read in multiple ways. Nonetheless, this does not mean that there is nothing outside Shakespeare, or no text which is not a Shakespearean text. The same can be said for social 'texts'. In principle at least, one can get outside a capitalist or colonial 'social text' by getting inside an autonomous social text instead. The existence of a unified colonial text is thus something which is imposed, and has to be constantly reimposed to remain effective.

This means that the holism of the social text (which is very different from any underlying holism at the level of becoming) is always contestable. In many respects, colonised societies are faced with demands – interpellations – backed by violence. Colonised people are commanded to capitulate to these interpellations. Capitalism in many ways generalises this command to capitulate, denying space for alternatives (Bey, 1996). Despite these commands, many people resist, even to the death. People fight back, run to the hills or the forests, hide from officials, dissimulate, and so on. Sometimes resistance fails, sometimes it is successful. In such contexts, mimicry and textual subversion can provide public-transcript covers for resistance (see below, 504-17). But they can also serve as pretexts for

capitulation, as ways to capitulate while pretending to resist. Resistance involves the choice of a different text – either openly, in insurrection, or covertly, behind feigned conformity. Bhabha effectively embraces capitulation, with the proviso that the dominant text is to be misappropriated and subverted. He concedes the question of the *choice of text*, because this leads to binaries and antagonism. This both misrepresents and weakens resistance.



I am sceptical of the all-encompassing strong constructivism Bhabha adopts, and the other assumptions (such as successful interpellation) which he adds to it. However, materialist critics are sometimes too quick to denounce theories like Bhabha's as mere 'idealism' – as a reduction of the material world to thought. The Marxist criticism that Bhabha (and other poststructuralists) treat power as simply a matter of language (see below, 890-907) misunderstands the way linguistic metaphors and terminology are used in poststructuralist texts. The point is not that colonialism or class or science are 'only' language, as if they can be wished away by using different words. Rather, the point is that, according to poststructuralists, once we become 'subjects' within language, the ways we think about, act on, and relate to the world reflect linguistic categories (or at least are structured *like* linguistic categories). 'Real' people and objects are arranged in systems which reflect their linguistic 'construction' or representation. People in particular are 'interpellated' into social positions. They come to actually take on the features they are ascribed. These 'texts' thus become material, not ideal. The fact that Bhabha terms something a text or a discourse does not mean that it is 'only' language. Economic structures, systems of social production, acts of violence and so on are treated in poststructuralism as discursive. This does not mean they are merely effects of language, but rather, that they are part of a socially meaningful structure. This is not all that different from Marx's claim that commodities do not inherently possess exchange-value but are assigned it socially through "commodity fetishism". The commodity system is

material, but it is created through social meanings, not from the natural attributes of objects.

Nevertheless, the poststructuralist leap of assuming that semiotic or psychoanalytic categories can be applied to social phenomena gives force to the materialist criticism. Even if reality is not 'only language', poststructuralists assume the supposed structure of language to be determinant of reality as people experience it. And in practice, Bhabha *does* privilege literature and high arts as sites of discursive practice, in a way which downplays politics and everyday life (see below, Chapter 11). Derridean-inspired poststructuralism does not literally assume that everything is language, but it gives language – or more precisely, a set of structuralist models of how language works – a privileged place in its discourse. Belief in extra-linguistic emotions, desires or flows is taken as naïve, essentialist and dangerous. This means that the theory functions very much *as if* language is the only reality, or the determinant reality.

The effects are very different from those of theories which assume that economics, or 'reason', or agency, or biology, or molecular flows are the determinant reality – or even if they assume that language is determinate, but don't theorise it in structuralist terms. Not only are the conclusions different – but the focus on language reflects back on the style of writing (see above, 19-73). Nonetheless, the strong constructivist view of language is a determinist or reductionist position. There are a lot of things which cannot be countenanced as possibilities, because they go against the primacy of the structure of language. The most worrying of these is the inability of many poststructuralists to recognise any kind of uniqueness or individuality within each person. Any such appearance is taken to be either a disguised effect of interpellation into an individualist social role, or else a standard structural effect of the constitutive gap which produces subjectivity. This means that psychotics, in particular, have no place in poststructuralism as usually formulated. The denial of anything outside representation also leads to a neglect of affect and of qualitative social life, or to their reduction to social and linguistic forces.



Bhabha versus Constructivism?

Another line of criticism is that Bhabha's totalising view of social construction is a misuse of poststructuralist ideas. Examining Bhabha's relationship to European poststructuralism, Lawrence Phillips (1998) makes a subtle point. Bhabha adopts many concepts from Lacan and Derrida. When Lacan and Derrida use these concepts, they refer mainly to language. However, Bhabha applies these concepts to the world. In this way, Bhabha effectively reduces the world to language, without explicitly doing so. For example, Derrida uses the idea of 'supplementarity' (see below, 357-364) to refer to a condition of language and western philosophy. He uses it to deconstruct particular theoretical texts. Bhabha instead uses it to define a positive path of self-empowerment. Phillips suggests that such a move misuses the original text by neglecting its focus on language.

Like Marxist critics (see below, 890-907), Phillips argues that Bhabha neglects material aspects of social life. He rejects the cultural materialism of the theorists he uses. Bhabha slips between abstract and actual spaces, without recognising any difference between them. Bhabha's inbetween space, for instance, is a space in "the text" (or in particular literary texts). It stems from discontinuities in the text. Yet it also refers to real experiences of displacement, disjunction and so on. Bhabha thus reduces the concrete level to the supposedly constitutive textual level, and real spaces of disjuncture to the abstract textual inbetween space. But the inbetween space is by definition 'no-where', absent and

unknowable. According to Phillips, Bhabha sees history as an eternal repetition of the displacement of signifiers. He does not see it as a temporal process occurring in material space. This means that nothing can happen in history, except for the endless deferral which is built into the signifying process. It feels to Phillips like the trauma and injustice of historical experience is lost in this process of conflation. History is diffused in an abstract, textual space, losing its emotional and social intensity.

Another line of criticism arises within poststructuralism, from scholars whose readings of Lacan and Derrida are more careful than Bhabha's. From a Lacanian point of view, Antony Easthope argues that Bhabha follows Derrida in seeing all subjectivity as split. Bhabha refuses any account which would explain or make sense of the identities hybridity undermines. He presumes that all identities are 'Cartesian'. In other words, they are based on the oppressive binarising logics of western thought. This means that Bhabha effectively opposes identity, and does his best to undercut it. In fact, Easthope argues, people need a certain degree of identity. The Derridean process of deconstruction ends in psychosis (which for Easthope is a bad thing). We need to avoid psychosis by continuing to create and protect an identity. But this identity is 'imaginary' in the Lacanian sense, not symbolic (1998a:147). (From a Deleuzian perspective, psychosis is not necessarily a bad thing – but it is certainly nothing like Bhabha's disjunctive semi-inclusion in the dominant order). The distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary (roughly speaking, between the literal meanings of words and the emotional meanings attached to particular words and images) is crucial to a Lacanian critique of Bhabha's and Derrida's view of language. Unlike Lacan, Derrida provides no reason why people identify themselves with some signifiers rather than others (Easthope, 1998a:149).

Followed consistently, therefore, Bhabha would undercut identity. But, according to Easthope, Bhabha is not very consistent. Easthope argues that Bhabha *does* offer his readers an identity. This identity is an 'idealised self-image' offering 'self-congratulatory compassion' to survivors of racism (1998a:147). It is a kind of idealised liberal anti-racism.

Bhabha claims to undercut identity, but this anti-racist identity as 'colonised' actually escapes the process of deconstruction. Bhabha's work also offers a 'pleasure of mastery'. Readers are able to feel sure of themselves even when surrounded by contingency and ambiguity (1998a:148). This is presumably why Bhabha does not succumb to the overwhelming affects of anxiety, paranoia, and panic which he values as progressive (see below, 331-46). In effect, Bhabha rebuilds and affirms a strong identity while disavowing it.



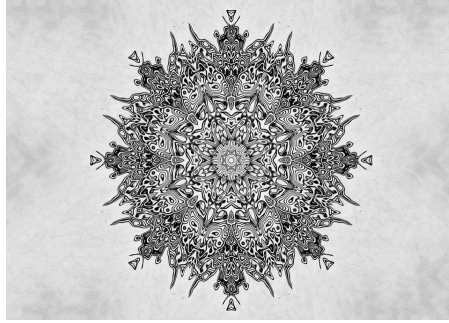
The immateriality of Bhabha's texts is also of concern to other authors. Fellow postcolonial theorist Robert Young argues that Bhabha simply progresses 'from one conceptual scheme to another' (1990:146). He never gets beyond the idea of concepts relating to concepts. Similarly, Perloff makes the criticism that Bhabha's texts are strangely *placeless*. Bhabha seems uninterested in urban or rural spaces, the relationship between them, or the relationship of humans to the natural environment (Perloff, 2001:125). Bhabha's work is written in a timeless non-place of psychological or textual functioning. In this timeless non-place, the contingency of particular places and times is strangely irrelevant. In some respects, this echoes the physical and discursive non-places of capitalism (Augé, 1995; Simola, 1998), and the global designs of modernity which Bhabha critiques. In contrast, world systems approaches are acutely concerned with particular geographical spaces.

Similarly, Parry argues that Bhabha's terms and framings are so broad and generic that they are detached from the contexts they are used to discuss (2004:3). I think Parry is right about this. When Bhabha talks about British India for example, he does not talk about the power-structures affecting the Indian peasantry, the stratifications in everyday life, the forms of exploitation, the modified collaborationist state, the East India Company and its relations to the British state, the rather different positions of the local and London-based Company officers, and so on. He talks in very general terms about the colonial text, the colonised subject, and the ambiguity between them, which somehow play out in incidents like the circulation of chapatis (see below, 497-9). When Bhabha discusses mimicry, he does not consider whether politicians, merchants, artisans and peasants all mimic to the same degree, or in the same way. In this sense, his work is desituated. And he *does* make big, general claims about colonialism as such – even if he does so inconsistently. For example, Chapter 3 of *The Location of Culture*, “The Other Question”, is devoted to a general analysis of stereotypes. Bhabha roots these in ‘the fetish of colonial discourse’ (LC, 78). And this fetishism seems to be the same, across contexts. In the course of the chapter, Bhabha refers to India, to Edward Saïd's work on the Arab world, to Fanon's discussions of anti-black racism, to Chinese ‘coolies’ (migrant labourers), and even to Ireland. ‘The colonial fetish’ is apparently the same across all of these cases.



I would argue that this neglect of particularity does not necessarily follow from a constructivist ontology. The idea of discursive construction does *not* require the view that the structure is an overwhelming totality that we can only modify gently at its intersections. It means that radically different constructions are possible, which are unimaginable from within the dominant frame. The question is then how to access or create these different constructions. These alternative constructions bear no relation whatsoever to the dominant structure besides rejection or conflict. They are necessarily in antagonism with it, not because they are structural effects of binaries, but because they are incommensurable in a concrete sense. What precludes these conclusions for Bhabha is not his constructivism or his anti-essentialism. Claims about alternative constructions don't require realism; they are compatible with constructivism. In Bhabha's work, they are precluded by his belief that people are simply effects of linguistic categories, rather than actors who construct realities *through* linguistic categories *which can be changed or replaced*. Similarly, even if a theorist believes that social life requires a master-signifier or 'trunk', this does not mean that the *current* master-signifier or trunk is ineliminable.

Even if the whole of social life is entirely socially constructed, it does not follow that it is a single continuous totality. Millions and billions of human actors act in diverse ways to construct and reconstruct their subjective 'lifeworlds'. The idea of the dominant system as a closed totality – identical with the whole of language, the whole of the 'thinkable', and the source of one's own identities and desires – is unduly totalising. In practice, the system incorporates some of the many different possible discourses which can be found across social life, often in incoherent combinations. Other kinds of social constructions – with different categories, different interpellations and different distributions of discursive power – exist in niches and cracks throughout the social space. If the discursive aspect of the dominant system is what Scott (1990) terms the public transcript (see below, 504-17), then attention must also be given to the hidden transcripts of different social groups.



I see little reason to accept the ultimately pessimistic view that people's desires, identities and everyday practices are always irreducibly part of the dominant system. People can form new communities, based on extra-systemic desires, which effectively construct a different discourse, a different total way of being. This secession from the dominant structure even changes the ways in which language and identity are constructed – eliminating the role of the master-signifier (Robinson, 2018a; Robinson and Tormey, 2010). The formation of such communities is often more radical than the strategic manoeuvres possible at the reformist intersection with the system.

Also, the entire social system (capitalism, colonialism, or modernity) is for Bhabha a system of linguistic construction. People are subordinated to categories. He takes for granted that this will always be the case, even if some ambivalence can be created or exploited. In contrast, Stirner (2017/1845) argues that oppression is based on people subordinating themselves to 'spooks'. A 'spook' is an idea or category which possesses a person, like a ghost. People are in fact unique beings whose desires and resonances provide a basis for meaning and value. Each 'unique one' makes and remakes itself in a process of creativity and flow. Stirnerian politics rejects racism as a kind of normative repression against unique individuals who should not be reduced to their race. However, it equally rejects approaches based on positionality, which make a similar mistake (c.f. Dragonowl, 2016). Bhabha's view of the modern subject is a 'spook' from a Stirnerian point of view. In other words, it is something people think they are. It is not what they actually are.



From Stirner's point of view, Bhabha makes the mistake of assuming that people's real nature is the same as their structural position within outer classification systems. The categories involved in Bhabha's politics would be seen as spooks. People are treated as ciphers of whiteness, blackness, colonised, coloniser, rather than as distinct, unique people. This is typical of how Stirner treats spooks in general. Any spook requires that each person be seen as valueless in themselves (2017:33). They have value only if they serve the spook. It thus dehumanises or deindividuates the people who it supposedly liberates, as well as those it fights – colonised as well as coloniser. In contrast, Stirner calls for a type of joyful, intense exercise of one's capacities and desires without reservation. Such a process breaks the power of spooks. It rests on an assumption that there is something present in each person – a force of desire, play and creativity – which is not reducible to social categories. This force can be recovered and taken as a basis from which to resist the oppressive effects of categories. Bhabha would, of course, see this as naïve. The unique one is a perspective-illusion arising from a “spook”, the word “I”.

From a Stirnerian point of view, a politics of liberation based on the primacy of spooks only liberates the abstract category, and not the people inside it. For example, a black liberation politics liberates the idea of 'blackness', and not actual people who are classified as black. Actually-existing black people might be disqualified as 'un-black', as race traitors or part-white, if they don't conform to a normative idea of 'blackness'. Power is held, not

by everyone in the group, but by those who define the category. This analysis can be compared to those of Korzybski (1995/1933) and Barthes (1972/1957). For Barthes, oppressive power often rests on 'myths' which reduce people to imaginary categories. Barthes often designates myths with the suffix '-ness' or '-ity' (1972:120-1). The myth of (say) blackness or whiteness is a myth, an appearance, in contrast to the real thing. For Korzybski, it is a major epistemological error to confuse the members of an extensional set (the people or things classified into a particular category) with the intension, or internal meaning, of the set. In a related critique, Perlman (1984) portrays category-based liberation politics as a form of nationalism. It reshuffles the categories within the system without challenging the system, installing the formerly persecuted as persecutors.

There are similarities between Stirner and Bhabha. In Bhabha's account, like Stirner's, the point is to subvert the power of oppressive categories. In theory, this kind of theory disrupts the formation of meaning in terms of counterposed categories. It emphasises instead the free play of signifiers. Binary oppositions are replaced by chains of signification (Shumar, 2010:498). The major difference between Stirner and Bhabha is that, for Bhabha, the process of subject-formation through categories is constitutive. Once we've deconstructed the false categories which rule us, there's no 'self' left to be liberated, because the 'self' is an effect of these categories. The level of pre-social joy and desire which is the basis for resistance in Stirner is ruled out in advance. It does not exist from a structuralist point of view. The self or 'subject' and its desires are social constructs. The process of destroying oppressive categories is also a process of self-destruction. For Stirner, the point is to resist and overthrow alienation. In contrast, alienation is not a problem in Bhabha's work. It is a constitutive element in any possible existence. For example, every space of belonging is also 'unhomely'. The closest people can get to liberation is a disjunctive, discomforting experience of otherness and uncertainty. This contrasts sharply with Stirnerian joy.



There are thus limits to how far the effects of Bhabha's ontological approach are actually progressive. For Lacan and Althusser, the process of subject-formation is unavoidable. There will always be 'self' and 'other'. We can shift the categories, but we can't do away with them. Yet Bhabha seeks to disrupt them constantly. Also, if one reads Lacan and Althusser carefully, one realises that interpellations are not always successful. Some people never internalise the categories, or internalise them sideways. They become 'bad subjects'. This means that it is far too simplistic to assume that all westerners are 'modern subjects' or all Indians are 'colonised subjects'. Bad subjects need to be recognised. A satisfactory theory would also have to deal with the counter-interpellations through which colonised subjects interpellate colonisers right back. For all its complicated prose, Bhabha's theory often lacks the theoretical nuance needed to deal with complex situations.

Problems with Bhabha's Account of Subjectivity

There's also a few problems with Bhabha's view of subjectivity. Firstly, constructing a grand theory does not forbid others from constructing other grand theories from their own points of view. Secondly, there is a danger that juxtaposed positions without a grand theory rely on neoliberalism, or other western epistemological regimes, as the implicit context of articulation. They are able to coexist and communicate only because they rely on particular spaces (universities, art galleries, English-language global literature) which are by no means neutral. The revaluation of indigenous knowledge, for example, often relies on global or 'western' science as the sphere of articulation (Agrawal, 1999; Berlin, 1992:201). Thirdly, Bhabha neglects to discuss the possibility that, while local resistances may differ, the global system of power is itself totalising. Opponents may have to negotiate spaces for multiple positions in resistance to neoliberalism. They are nevertheless rejecting a single, totalising system. Furthermore, this system is increasingly cybernetic and behaviourist, rather than individualised and modernist. When the system reduces everyone to outer "behaviours" and relations, it is unhelpful for opponents to do the same.

The idea that self and other are co-constitutive – and therefore, that the privileged must be torn down so that the oppressed can be raised up – has become an element of faith in much of today's radical politics. However, it depends on a contentious analogy between society and language. A critic might respond that linguistic categories require such a definition against an 'other', but social realities do not. The linguistic other does not have to actually exist. For example, we can distinguish living people from ghosts, mortals from immortals and dinosaurs from dragons, regardless of whether ghosts, immortals or dragons actually exist. So, it isn't necessarily impossible for everyone to be knowledgeable, for everyone to have human rights, for everyone to have the power to act, and so on.

Some concepts seem to require others which actually exist, while some concepts do not. The concepts of health, well-fed-ness and happiness require the concepts of sickness, hunger and unhappiness. But they do not require that anyone actually *be* sick, hungry or unhappy – the same way the concept of mortality does not require that anyone actually *be* immortal. However, some social statuses do seem to depend on an 'other'. For example, power in the sense of domination requires that some people be less powerful. Nobody could be identified as “rich” if everyone had the same wealth. High status depends on low status. If one of several competing claims is deemed “true”, the others must be “false”.



The appeal of the idea of co-constitutivity is increased by two related facts. Firstly, prejudiced people *do* seem to get an ego-boost out of subordinating others. Secondly, western economic consumption involves plunder, exploitation and ecological destruction elsewhere in the world. This means that *in practice*, goods like health and food seem to be subject to co-constitutivity, requiring their opposites. Western companies take food from poor countries to feed people in rich countries, “export” pollution from rich countries to poor countries, and so on. However, this kind of scarcity is not inevitable. There's enough food in the world to feed everyone. But today's political and economic systems are based on scarcity. People have to compete for validation and recognition to take part in these systems. This is what makes other things scarce, too.

Is Postcolonialism Poststructuralism?

Postcolonial theory often looks to observers like it is simply 'applied poststructuralism'. It takes certain ideas of Lacan, Derrida and Foucault – ideas already schematised and simplified by Anglo-American theorists – and applies them to colonialism as an object of study. It thus does something very similar to a Marxist or a rational-choice or a comparative political analysis of non-western countries. Yet it claims to be something else – to be a distinct theory with its own name. The reason for this is that the claims of the theory reflect back on the theory itself. Bhabha believes that oppressed people constantly take up and alter dominant discourses. They mimic the discourse, but from a different point of view, with different background assumptions, and in a way which speaks from what is denied yet excessively present in the situation. This has 'unhomely' effects. It puts on display the ambiguity and ambivalence of language.



Bhabha's postcolonial theory is itself mimicry in this sense. At the level of theoretical content, most of the theory is either lifted directly or subtly redesigned based on European and American poststructuralism. It has as at least as much in common with poststructuralism as (say) Mao has with Lenin, or Amartya Sen has with John Rawls. But for Bhabha, the reinflection, the change in standpoint, the effects of mimicry and translation into a new context, render postcolonial theory fundamentally different from poststructuralism. It is a different theory, not because it says different things, but because its place in the discursive field is different. Whether one finds this plausible depends largely on whether one agrees with Bhabha's analysis of the discursive effects of mimicry. At the very least, it seems to suggest that other Southern reapplications of other theories should also be recognised as distinct theories on the same grounds.

Another difficulty is that the language model is a Eurocentric theory. It is formulated by

European authors such as Lacan, Derrida and Saussure, based on features of European languages and subjectivities. Yet Bhabha applies it as a general model of subject-formation, valid cross-culturally. This arguably denies differences between European languages and others. For example, the idea of mutually constitutive, self-other binaries is specifically western and modern. Andean languages such as Quechua use a concept of *yanantin*, in which binary opposites are seen as complementary (Webb, 2012). Similar concepts exist in Taoism, and even in Ancient European theories such as Aristotle's. There is also some controversy over whether the Pirahã language (spoken by one group of Amazonian hunter-gatherers) has recursion and even whether it formerly had pronouns (Everett, 1986, 2005). Also, some knowledge seems to be stored non-linguistically – for example, as images or physical sensations. There are even ways of speaking which replace words and text with images, such as communication cards. It is not clear that these kinds of knowledge are structured according to the language model. It is possible to argue for the cultivation of linguistic differences, rather than a homogenising social text (Anon., 2011/n.d.). It is also possible to argue for looser, local, orally-based forms of language in opposition to totalising language (e.g. Zerzan, n.d.a). However, this would require the kind of oppositional stance Bhabha's theory precludes in advance.

Positionality and “False Consciousness”

Bhabha's kind of positional theory also entails a certain denial of the actuality of submerged perspectives and cultures of silence. Empirically, many colonised and subaltern peoples take one of two positions. Firstly, they might aspire to be included in modernity. They want the same consumer goods and standard of living as westerners. Secondly, they might reject modernity and glorify an essentialist view of tradition. This often leads to reactionary and authoritarian positions (see, below, Chapters 6 and 8). Yet Bhabha writes as if colonised people and migrants always have transgressive, radical, system-disrupting points of view.

Bhabha seems to think that a marginalised standpoint is radical in itself. Marginalised people are somehow exempt from the effects of cultural submersion, “common sense”, and dominant or hegemonic ideologies. This arguably elides the necessity for the emergence of voice (as in Fanon) or for a process of popular education (as in Gramsci and Freire) before oppressed people actually become radical. Beneath the subtlety of Bhabha's postcolonial theory, there is thus a residue of naïve empiricism regarding the self-evidence of experiences. People are wrongly taken to directly perform what they 'are', as social constructs with particular positionalities. This leads to a tendency by other authors to glorify naïve common-sense views held by people from oppressed backgrounds, and pretend they're more radical than they really are. A particularly absurd example of this is (Taylor, 2008), in which migrant participants expressed conservative anti-crime ideas. These ideas are taken to be transgressive of western liberalism – even though they are the same ideas found in right-wing discourse in the west!

Because someone is from an oppressed background, Bhabha assumes their perspective has radical effects. Their positionality expresses itself directly in their point of view, without the mediation of complicating ideologies and libidinal structures which reproduce power. Bhabha's position idealises subaltern people. He exaggerates the radicalism of their existing beliefs. It has been observed that, in practice, this type of approach tends to divert people into reformism (Landstreicher, n.d.; Gelderloos, 2010b). In addition, the assumption that marginal subjects always produce border-zones which are always transgressive can be repressive. It prevents Bhabha from seeing or hearing subaltern people who do not have such an agenda or such an effect. It only recognises marginalised people's speech if this speech takes a predictable form. This means that a lot of subaltern people cannot be heard.



Another problem is that positionalities are not necessarily as fragmented as Bhabha assumes. If there are no overarching categories but only everyday experiences based on diverse identities, how can one account for the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, or the all-encompassing authority-claims of the state? There is a danger that the emphasis on diverse positionalities can deflect from the ways in which alienation, capitalism, and statism function as 'metanarratives' or big stories, subordinating all the small particularities to their power, or incorporating them within the big frames. One might want to live in a world of diffuse partial particularities, but this doesn't mean that one does. Such a world might have to be built from scratch. Imagining that it already exists in capitalism helps nobody.

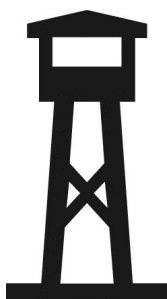
The idea that people from a particular demographic (in Bhabha's case, migrants) are necessarily endowed by their 'subject-position' with a radical perspective is inherently problematic. There are radical migrants, but there are also migrants with neoliberal or conservative politics. Some people migrate seeking an idealised neoliberal good life in the heartland of global power; some articulate their identities mainly through conservative attachments to an imagined homeland, which can manifest in support for authoritarian

movements such as Hindu communalism. In general, I'm sceptical that subaltern positionalities directly create revolutionary beliefs or identities. I believe there is more leeway in the Gramscian theory of "common sense". This theory suggests that subaltern people are usually submerged in a confused worldview connected to the dominant system. Revolutionary positions emerge from transformations of existing beliefs. They are not usually already present in everyday beliefs. Indeed, there is evidence that oppressed people reproduce dominant beliefs (e.g. Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013) and that they may even hold them *to a greater degree* than better-off groups (Jost et al., 2003). More cases where subaltern discourse does not conform to Bhabha's model are discussed below (Chapter 8).



Without ever articulating the theory explicitly, postcolonial theory operates as if boundaries and identities can be divided into two groups. There are those which deserve to be protected, and those which it is strategically necessary to trample down. The former are oppressed, subaltern, or minority positions. The latter are identities of oppressor groups. In order to maintain their 'right to narrate' (see below, 945-961), postcolonial and identity-related theorists often feel the need to enforce rigid boundaries against actual or perceived discursive violence. This is expressed in ideas such as 'personal boundaries', 'safe space' and 'cultural appropriation'. But if safety, and the preservation of the power to speak, is an important value, what remains of the subversive power of transgression?

The postcolonial position seems to depend on a double standard, and its selective deployment. Some boundaries are oppressive, authoritative identity-constructs which need to be transgressed. Others are necessary protections. But how can one tell them apart? Often, they are distinguished simply in an *ad hoc* manner, or in terms of the positionality of the subject which demands a boundary. But then, the subversive force of a positionality can no longer serve as the proof of its radicalism. This problem in postcolonial theory is rendered largely invisible by the strategic, selective deployment of absolute claims: *all* identities are authoritarian, *all* boundaries should be transgressed, or on the other hand, *all* boundaries matter.



In my view, there is something authoritarian in the assumption that lessons are best learnt from some standpoints rather than others. In political contexts, claims of this kind quickly transmute into claims that people should receive authority, obedience, or one-way monological listening on the basis that they belong to a particular social category. Bhabha gambles that a space which recognises process and contingency cannot become authoritarian or totalitarian. I believe this is a misunderstanding. Authoritarianism arises whenever a rigid form is elevated into the compulsory context of contact between positions – a 'trunk' through which particularities have to relate. This gesture of imposition of a social form is not avoided by Bhabha's position. The nature of the form is displaced, but its existence is not. The 'trunk' in Bhabha's work consists of his implicit general theoretical model, his shibboleths, and his insistence on stylistic aestheticisation. In practice, his approach would lead – and does lead, in academic and sometimes activist contexts – to sharp power-hierarchies based on aesthetic competency, theoretical orthodoxy (e.g. 'anti-essentialism'), and the ability to claim a marginalised standpoint.

Bhabha's focus on positionality perversely reinforces the totalising impulse of colonialism itself. By urging the colonised to be *what they are for the coloniser*, Bhabha effectively reproduces the overall structure of modern colonial power, and the exclusivity of the colonial frame. The colonised subvert and disrupt this frame only as an internally unsettling element *within* it – as the site of colonisers' projections. They never manage to break from or undermine the frame itself. Fanon, in contrast, suggests that the colonised never participate in the coloniser's world of signs (1965:75). And it is not true in practice that the colonised 'other' is simply a site for the coloniser's projections. In refusing to recognise any genuine separation of persons (because of co-constitutivity), and assuming successful interpellation or internalisation, Bhabha effectively fuses actual people with the projections and introjections others form in relation to them, Bhabha actually denies radical difference.

It may also involve a particular academic positionality. Mackenzie Wark criticises certain poststructuralist theories for using a concept of 'difference that is always the same' (Wark, 2017:99). They claim to value difference, but the difference they theorise is the same difference repeated over and over. This can have authoritarian effects. Wark says of Lacanian theory that it 'borrows from philosophy a certain authority-gesture, where causal chains stop at a peak beyond which there can be no questioning. Only that last term is no longer the God or Goddess, and still less Man, but the Void' (2017:100). He sees this approach as an effect of philosophers viewing the world on the model of their own labour.

In this theory, the 'other' is not valued as a unique being in themselves, independently of the 'privileged' ingroup. Rather, they are valued as a means of co-constitution. '[T]he purpose of conversation is to encounter the lack in ourselves, which then leads to the dialogic desire for the "other"'. This projected/introjected other 'does not simply fill the gap as much as make possible a process that sloughs off the calloused, dead skin that

covers up our vulnerabilities to “difference” - the strange and the unknown' (CA, 46). Minorities are important for Bhabha because they force 'privileged' ingroups to confront their own shadows and undergo ego-decomposition. The primary process of “liberation” involved is a process of metaphysical revelation of co-constitution, not a political process. And difference, dialogue, minority rights, liberation, are only valuable insofar as they aid this particular kind of 'healing' or self-change. The process of 'healing' amounts to the renunciation of desire and the acceptance of constitutive lack. To those who wish for no such process of self-change, or are incapable of it – and for those “others” who do not fill the appropriate, co-constitutive role – Bhabha's theory has little to offer. Anyone who chooses differently from Bhabha is by implication not really choosing at all, but simply shirking or hiding from the harsh reality of the negative – a moral failing, dressed-up as a theoretical failing. Like many proselytising religions, Bhabha simply insists that people *must* self-change, and never considers whether they can. Among those who are presumably to be 'forced' by 'globalisation' to adapt or die (see below, Chapters 10-12), are psychotics, anarchic countercultures – and the few indigenous groups who have preserved cosmologies with no room for constitutive lack.



Another side-effect of this position is that conversation between “lackists” who embrace the doctrine, and others who do not, becomes virtually impossible. Since the “lackist” approaches the conversation solely in terms of forcing the other to encounter their inner lack, other kinds of relation or encounter are foreclosed in advance. The impossible conversations include those which would assess the truth of the lackist's claims about constitutive lack in the first place. Because they are embedded in the speech-performance, these claims must retain the status of untouchable dogmas. Factual conversations about aspects of the world, logical analyses of others' truth-claims, honest conflicts between

adversaries, and even authentic compassionate responses to others' suffering (as particular individuals) are also largely ruled-out. For all the apparent “difference” permitted in Bhabha's theory, only one kind of relation is allowed: the relation between a co-constituted other, the slippery, dissembling, oracular poet who forces the encounter with lack, and an ego-dominated self who is resultantly humiliated or humbled. The entire range of human life – not to mention of politics, theory, and culture – is reduced to this single possible relation. If lackists can use their influence to impose their metaphysical beliefs through academic gatekeeping, then their impact on scholarship will be extremely regressive. And all this is done as means to the end of a revolution which by definition can never come, a liberation which simply consists in endlessly being miserable together (see below, Chapter 15).

There are very real senses in which (for instance) indigenous cosmologies are outside western thought, or subsistence economies are outside capitalist production. These are not questions of being simultaneously inside and outside as a constitutive Real. Nor are they questions of discursively constructed, Manichean binaries which rely on the existence of their antagonist. If Andeans believe that mountains have spirits (de Cadena, 2015), or Kwará'e believe that the goals of life are self-actualisation and rootedness (Gegeo, 1998), they decidedly do not believe this because they have been constructed by western reason to believe it. There are aspects of western reason which define its other as closer to nature, or as subjective and irrational, but nothing which says that the other will believe these particular things. What is more, these beliefs probably predated first contact with colonisers. They continue to exist, *in spite of* (not because of) the ways in which colonial power interpellates its others. And they would continue to exist, even if they received no space in dominant systems of knowledge whatsoever.



Because of his belief that interpellation always succeeds, Bhabha believes that mimicry occurs in people's real identities. It is not just as a public-transcript performance (see below, 504-17). Bhabha thus exaggerates the completeness of the colonial text. He exaggerates the extent to which colonial subjects are reducible to what they are to the colonised. He does not consider the ways people maintain other cultures distinct from the colonial text. This in turn grounds a politics which ignores the excluded and resistant, and which takes for granted the hegemony of global capitalism. In practice, the actual colonial 'other' is elided beneath the structuralist figure of the Other. This latter figure is a necessary effect of the self's subjectification. A post- or anti-colonial actor who uses this subjective position the way Bhabha advocates, in fact submerges her/himself in the exteriorised psychological structure of the coloniser. The Freirean process of coming to speak one's own word (Freire, 1970a, 1970b) has no place in Bhabha's theory. Bhabha also opposes the idea of a homogenised Other (LC, 52). However, he usually talks about the other in standardised terms.

Concealed Universalism

As suggested elsewhere, there is a concealed universalism in Bhabha's theory, which is derived from similar concealed universalisms in Lacan and Derrida (see below, 251-8, 264-8). As a result, these theories are in many ways, functionally, 'metanarratives'. They are big general theories which claim to explain everything, albeit at a structural and not a substantive level. Indeed, Bhabha admits that his position may be accused of 'linguistic or theoretical formalism', of an 'oppressive, even universalist, law of difference or doubling' (LC, 57). This creates a difficulty for a theory which is meant to be mobile, nomadic, and disrupt all fixed discourses (ODD, 8). What happens if the supposedly disruptive theory itself becomes a semi-permanent academic orthodoxy? And why is this apparently mobile theory actually so consistent in its basic contours over time?

Bhabha predictably rejects such criticisms. However, he often seems to do exactly what he says he isn't. For example, he concludes *DissemiNation*: 'In the narrative graftings of my chapter I have attempted no general theory, only a certain productive tension' (LC, 170). Yet throughout the essay, Bhabha *does* provide a general theory: language is prior to reality-effects (LC, 164), the movement of signification both constitutes and subverts power (LC, 147), identity is always incomplete (LC, 162), its projections 'must always return' (LC, 166), minority discourse takes a universal, disruptive form (LC, 157). Nations are 'always less than one nation and double' (LC, 168), and 'the national memory is always the site of the hybridity of histories and the displacement of narratives' (LC, 169). Each of the juxtaposed texts are read through this single frame. How, then, can Bhabha claim that he has 'attempted no general theory'? There seems, here, to be a textbook instance of disavowal in the strict psychoanalytic sense. Bhabha at once posits a metanarrative and disavows it.



In another passage, Bhabha effectively admits that the language model functions as a trunk. Critics 'resort to the peculiar temporality of the language metaphor' to 'provide a social imaginary' which can articulate incompatible, disjunctive positions (LC, 176). It is an 'arbitrary closure', a 'unity... in quotation marks' (LC, 179). Despite the rhetoric about

incompatibility, this statement actually suggests that all the positionalities *are compatible with the language model*. It is this model which serves as the master-signifier unifying them in a common project. It is because they are all 'in question marks' that they can be subject to 'arbitrary' power, analogous to that of Bonapartism. Any position which has *the wrong affects* cannot be articulated in this way. Anti-authoritarian positions which resist closure are necessarily excluded. And it is because of the model's peculiar "lackism" that it can nonetheless seem to allow for incompatibility. But this "lack" in fact functions as a positivity (see Robinson, 2005).

The focus on colonialism and race also functions as a kind of trunk. Bhabha's critique of Foucault demonstrates its trunk-like character. Foucault addresses sexuality and anti-gay structures, prisons, and mad liberation, but neglects colonialism and race. For Bhabha, this is not merely an oversight or a difference in focus. It renders Foucault complicit in modern power and guilty of 'disavowal' (LC, 248). Though Foucault theorises oppression in general, and Bhabha also draws on his work, the neglect of this *particular* oppression is principal, fundamental, decisive. It is a lacuna in the Althusserian sense (see above, 94). Yet a Foucauldian could make the corresponding accusation that Bhabha 'disavows' sexuality and heteronormativity, the oppression of "mad" people and prisoners, or for that matter gender, class, and disability. Bhabha's criticism of Foucault only makes sense if colonialism and/or race are really, structurally, more important than the other forms of oppression which Bhabha fails to discuss. Bhabha, and any author making these kinds of claims based on others' elisions, cannot be truly "intersectional", in the sense of not elevating some axes of oppression over others. They have to see some oppressions as more fundamental than others. Bhabha may wish to forego taxonomy so as to focus on translation and voice (ODD, 9-11). However, his questions regarding who speaks and from where (ODD, 11) is implicitly taxonomic. It requires that people be sorted into groups so that their standpoints can be specified. The implicit, concealed nature of Bhabha's process of classification does not render it an alternative to classification. Instead, it allows him to resist attempts to verify or falsify the classification.

Syntax is another register of Bhabha's concealed universalism. The word 'always' appears 86 times in *The Location of Culture*. Some of these appear in quotes or in depictions of others' discourse. However, many involve big general theoretical claims. To take some examples:

- Truth is always marked by ambivalence (22)
- Identity always involves a co-constituted other (45)
- Representations are always split and ambivalent (51-2)
- Bodies always exist in both the domains of desire and power (67)
- Subjects always occupy positionalities (72)
- The representation of difference is always also a matter of authority (89)
- Identity-effects are always split (91)
- Colonialism is always ambivalent (107)
- Discrimination always refers to a process of splitting and subject-formation (111)
- Authority and reality-effects are always besieged by fixations and phantoms (116)
- Repetition is always a little bit uncanny (131)
- Identities are always incomplete and open to cultural translation (162-3)
- Identities can always be reinscribed and relocated (234)

Many of these 'always'-claims reassert the trunk-function of the lackist language model. They clearly demonstrate the metanarrative function of this model. In addition, there are many cases where Bhabha makes claims about nominalised abstract entities on a broad, abstract scale – often using the word “the”, or other devices implying unity. For instance, he writes of 'the desire of colonial power' (LC, 116), 'the postcolonial psyche/subject' (LC, 50), 'the Moroccan souk' (LC, 180), the minority standpoint (LC, 2), '[t]he temporality of Tangiers' (LC 183), 'the subject of cultural difference', 'the racist's nightmare', 'the

minority position', 'the migrant culture' (LC, 224), 'the primal scene of the modern Western nation' (LC, 250), and the characteristics of 'minority discourse' (LC, 157). He can even claim that minorities have the 'truest eye' (LC, 5) and contrast their 'testimony' with the ideology and rationalisations of modernity (LC, 171). Within two sentences he writes of '*the* return of *the* subject agent, as *the* interrogative agency in *the* catechrestic position', which is '*the* locus of symbolic identification that structures *the* symbolic realm' (LC, 184) – six 'the's' in close succession, all referring to more-or-less abstract categories, and explicating an absolute model of agency. Bhabha even claims to 'plot the narrative of the nation' (LC, 142), as if all national identities are alike, and puts disjuncture down to 'the nature of historical experience' (ANNS, 216). Other 'always'-claims are implicit in formulations of the kind 'to X is to Y' – for example, '[t]o encounter Barthes's daydream is to acknowledge the formative contribution of semiotics to [certain] influential concepts' (LC, 181). These generally involve Bhabha's personal reading of a text, but present this reading as a necessary effect of the text. They embed universalist assumptions which Bhabha explicitly disavows. They often seem to rehearse an *idée fixe* (fixed idea) which Bhabha endlessly repeats, and “reads into” each text or artwork “from outside”.



The claim to be speaking from a positionality, as a vent for a particular discourse rather than as an individual, carries considerable dangers of substitutionism and vanguardism. Hence, Bhabha attributes his own discourse as 'emerg[ing] from... postcolonial contramodernity' (LC, 175), as if he is simply acting as a vent for social forces. By implication, he carries the authority of a representative of the entire underside of history. And he claims for 'the postcolonial critic' a role of *representing* incommensurability (LC, 173), in an almost vanguardist sense in which he *is* incommensurability incarnate. In

another passage, we are told that Bhabha's political ally Stuart Hall is 'writing from the perspective of the fragmented, marginalized, racially discriminated against members of a post-Thatcherite underclass' (LC, 176) – a class to which Hall (by then an established academic) does not belong, and to which he is unconnected by any recognisable form of representation. This all looks suspiciously like general theory or the writing of a metanarrative. Bhabha asserts that the idea of a 'homogenized Other' is 'facile' (LC, 52). Again, this appears to be a disavowal. It coexists with constant statements about *the* standpoint or function of *the* other. And he claims that '[t]he postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation' (LC, 173). But this claim is belied in its very content: the claim that there is a *singular* postcolonial perspective. In another passage, Bhabha writes about a particular black feminist artist as if she represents 'the black feminist critique' (OF, 186). This critique is different from white feminist or black male critiques – but the difference from other black feminisms is not recognised.



Poststructuralists typically evade the accusation of essentialism through the use of an internal category of lack or ambiguity which functions as a substantive element of their theories. In Bhabha, this role is performed by ambivalence (and other concepts related to the inbetween zone; see Chapter 5). Ambivalence is supposedly a category that cannot be structurally fixed in place (TT, 82). It is never entirely immanent. However, Bhabha's theory, like those of other Lacanians and Derrideans, *uses* ambivalence as if it were a

substantive structural element (see Robinson, 2005). As a result, Lacanian/Derridean theory makes the same mistake as other grand theories. It reduces all the complexity in the world to a simple schema which always applies (Bhabha's 'language model'). But what if some differences come from elsewhere? What if some things are *not* socially constructed? What if some things are socially constructed, but not through the 'language model'?

When Deleuze and Guattari criticise psychoanalysts for interpreting children's diverse attachments as so many variants of the Oedipal triangle (1983:45-6), they are implicitly criticising Lacanian theory. Even more so – since Lacan is arguably more flexible than Deleuze and Guattari allow – it applies to writers such as Bhabha. His valorisation of contingency and ambiguity is in fact a valorisation of a type of contingency and ambiguity which is *already known*, structurally. This structural stand-in paradoxically closes the theory to actual difference which might escape it. The structurally 'known unknown' serves as an alibi to deny the 'unknown unknowns' which might require rethinking of the theory. One problem with big ontological claims like Bhabha's is that a single counter-example is enough to demolish them. We shall explore some of these counter-examples later (Chapters 6 and 8). Another point of disagreement is that Deleuzian theory rejects Bhabha's claim that there is no knowledge without representation (LC, 23). Expressive experiences of the molecular level are not experienced in differential terms. Truth-claims may always have a differential structure, but life does not. This is why Bhabha's readings are often so repetitive and forced – belying his claim to articulate a mobile, nomadic theory. Indeed, his readings are often more repetitive than those of (say) interpretive anthropology, which vary because of their responsiveness to empirical context. In Bhabha's work, the *idée fixe* of constitutive inbetweenness inhibits such responsiveness.

Bhabha's focus on enunciation and performance also tends to eliminate dialogue and exchange. Each subject engages in a self-enclosed reconstruction of deferred meaning, and the different reconstructions remain incommensurable with one another. Dialogue

between them becomes impossible. We see here a foreshadowing of the current world of social media, where small, self-contained groups engage in a closed groupthink which rejects dialogue and critique, insisting that the claims of one's own 'experience' are beyond challenge. Is this the same agonism-free public space which Bauman (2000) detects in shopping malls - a world where the fear of exposure to difference leads to sanitised spaces lacking in intergroup civility? At the very least, the two are strangely resonant.



There is also an echo with the idea of 'repressive tolerance' (Marcuse, 1969; Pateman, 1975) which is common in critiques of American dominant ideologies. Without the possibility of decisive critique or reply by the listener, all claims are reduced to one's own 'opinion'. They have no force for others, and their power as truth-claims is eliminated. This can have a silencing effect. Bhabha tries to get out of this dilemma by implying that the perspectives of marginal groups should have force for privileged groups because of co-constitutivity. However, this relies on objective truth-claims about the actual structure of oppression and privilege which contradict the basic assumption of incommensurability (c.f. Dragonowl, 2016). There is a paradox here. On the one hand, Bhabha emphasises that all language is 'negotiation' – replacing social antagonism with dialogue and meaning-production. On the other hand, his belief in incommensurability undercuts any possibility for dialogue.

Disjuncture and Agency

The 'language model' of agency is controversial. For example, Marxist critics tend to argue that this view attributes to subjects a greater degree of freedom than they have (see below, 890-907). For Bhabha, reality is always a disjunctive present. It is an eternally recurring moment of deferred or impossible identity-construction. This means that, in principle, anything is possible at any time. Anyone at any time can forget their past and take on a new role or identity (Chandra, 2012:212). According to critics, this ignores the fact that less-privileged people do not have any such freedom to choose their role. They are trapped in identities by how others treat them. This also allows theorists to ignore the 'painful past' and instead celebrate the 'performative freedom' of the present (2012:212).



This critique is a re-run of Marx's (1846) response to Stirner (2017/1845). In *The Ego and its Own*, Stirner argued that people are trapped in alienating social roles by 'spooks', or social categories. Someone who rejects and fights against spooks becomes an autonomous ego or agent. Marx replies that social determinations are in fact material and inescapable for each individual. At its simplest, this means that spooks continue to impact on someone who rejects them as long as the rest of humanity believes in them. Marx, however, meant something more than this. He also saw social categories as part of an unfolding process of historical becoming of the human essence - an essence which is irreducibly collective.

I think that Marxist critics are right that Bhabha places too much weight on disjunction as a political force. He ignores the extent to which dominant meanings are enforced, and slippage prevented, by the power of dominant groups. The meaning of the law, for

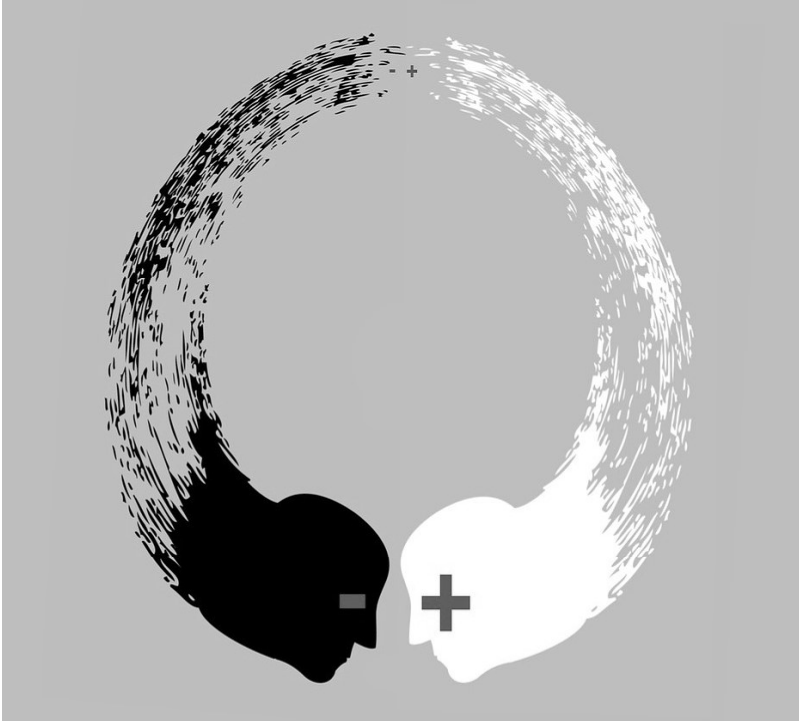
instance, is open to endless slippage. Anti-racists can reinterpret laws as permitting various actions which are usually seen as illegal. But the social operation of law is fixed by the power of police and judges to determine its application. As long as the dissident who reinterprets the law is still convicted and punished, and other social agents do nothing about it, the fact of disjunction is politically ineffectual. This political problem is what gives power to the Marxist critique. As I argue elsewhere (below, Chapter 11), Bhabha often talks as if a social performance or even a work of 'high' art or theory which is only seen by a handful of people is directly effective in undermining entrenched social categories. In fact, it undermines the categories only within the text itself and the parts of its audience which 'understand' (or construct) a subversive meaning from it. This power to shift meanings may be very local and ineffectual overall.

On the other hand, I'm not convinced that Bhabha's position actually means that people can adopt any role they choose. The process of subversion of meaning through existing categories always responds to the existing configuration of these categories. Kapoor (2003) explains this very well, and implies that Marxist critics miss the point about the basis for agency in Bhabha's work. Indeed, Bhabha tends to assume that people are entirely effects of their interpellations or social construction. They aren't so much free to construct the world as they please, as they are effects of how the world is already constructed. But they have some limited freedom to change the world by altering the inflections and adding supplements to the dominant signifiers. Bhabha is not Stirner. He also is not an 'idealist' of the kind criticised by Marx. These idealists were philosophers who believed that Mind, Spirit or Reason was the determining force in the universe. Bhabha, instead, believes that the structure of language and identity is the determining force. This structure even determines mind, will, reason and emotion. In this, Bhabha is actually rather similar to structuralist Marxists such as Althusser and Žižek. The main difference is that there is no economic 'last instance' in Bhabha. The structure of language, rather than economics, is the final determinant of social life.



Also, Marxists tend to exaggerate the extent to which people are trapped in social roles. The emergence of autonomous social movements and practices of exodus is usually possible to one degree or another. People might not be trapped in the role of worker if they can seize their factories, flee to autonomous zones, create subsistence or solidarity economies, squat buildings, and so on. Hence, the process of subordinating people as 'workers' or 'colonised' must be constantly reproduced through contingent practices. These practices can fail. This is recognised in Marxist and anarchist works on resistance (De Angelis, 2006; Holloway, 2002; Scott, 1990; MNC, 2009; Bey, 1985).

Some of the practices Bhabha refers to are similar to those discussed by authors such as James Scott. To return to the example above, there *are* cases where a political re-reading of a law has become politically effectual because it is backed by social power. The elite reading of the law is unenforceable because the elite lacks the power of enforcement. Or, the enforcement process is frustrated by mass mobilisation. For example, attempts to evict squats might lead to militant resistance both inside the squat and in the streets. I would thus take a third position against both Bhabha and his critics. Performative freedom is possible, *but only* for an autonomous subject. A subject only becomes autonomous if they are able in practice to escape from control by the dominant system. Autonomy requires an ideological 'secession' from the dominant belief-system, but it also requires material practices of resistance and escape.



The self-other divide is not always and necessarily constitutive. In some societies, border relations with outgroups are definitive. In others, including some hunter-gatherer groups, the strength of connections at the core of the society is the main factor determining the social bond. Border-experiences are far less important (Ingold, 1999; Bird-David, 1994). I have elsewhere argued that this type of formation based on intensity within a group also characterises autonomous social movements (Robinson, 2018a). This type of recomposition is typically dismissed by postcolonial theorists as “white”, because it is not based on self-other responsibility. However, it offers a more definite transgression of, and alternative to, dominant ways of seeing than the endless repetition and reinflection of the dominant discourse.

Modernity or Empire?

Rejecting modern subjectivity is not necessarily liberatory. According to critics like Hardt and Negri (2000), we are no longer in modernity. The dominant system does not need modern subjects any more – it needs people who are subject to what Deleuze and Guattari (1987:428, 451) term 'machinic enslavement'. Machinic enslavement involves social connection through cybernetic insertion as a node in social assemblages or 'machines'. Conformity is ensured through one's place as a part of the machine, and responsiveness to feedback within it (c.f. Baudrillard, 1993, 1994; Virilio, 1994, 2000; Invisible Committee, 2015). Hence, capitalism no longer relies on fixed identities. It already treats people as elements in cybernetic processes, as demographic aggregates, as vectors carrying genes and memes, as combinations of neurological and bodily processes, and so on. Postcolonial deconstruction of the 'modern subject' might reinforce this tendency. It might lead to deeper forms of machinic enslavement, by eliminating the concept of the 'individual' as a boundary against social control. In my view, the critique of the modern subject is liberatory only if it recognises and empowers exactly those aspects of the self which are suppressed in the modern subject – becoming, desire (as process), self-actualisation, relationality, the 'higher' or spiritual self, the importance of affect (emotion), and the uniqueness of each person. Structuralism and poststructuralism generally fail to empower because they continue to deny these other aspects.

This criticism is similar to those made by certain scholars. According to Phillips, Bhabha offers 'not a place of dwelling', but of 'self-exile'. He has little to offer to displaced subjects except further insecurity. Easthope goes further, arguing that the idea of a non-Cartesian subjectivity leading to openness to difference is 'wishful thinking'. Firstly, Bhabha's view of language requires that the ego continue to be produced through the exclusion of the Other. This is structurally necessary, given Bhabha's assumptions. Secondly, openness to the differential construction of identity as a theoretical position does not necessarily lead to tolerance (1998:346). In practice, Easthope's fears seem to

have been confirmed in the growing intolerance seen today. His criticism is also textually well-founded.



Bhabha's Binaries

In Bhabha as in many poststructuralists, binarising is both condemned in some cases, and seen as structurally necessary. This can lead to apparent performative contradictions in Bhabha's work. Bhabha seeks to disrupt the binarised structure of language. However, he also tends to focus strongly on binaries. His theory is actually *more* focused on binaries than most everyday language! Consider, for example, the importation or invention of generalising nouns ending in '-ity' or '-ness', and the frequent conversion of adjectives into nouns – such as 'the archaic'. These types of language establish much more totalising categories than the everyday terms they're based on. For example, compare “whiteness” or

“blackness” to the more common use of “white” or “black” as an adjective. Or compare inbetweenness (liminality, ambivalence, hybridity, ambiguity, time-lag..) to the positional phrase 'one thing is in between two others'. This type of language reifies relations into things. This, in turn, allows sweeping generalisations about them. It is rather anomalous that Bhabha tends to binarise. He does this because his underlying theory suggests that binaries are a central object of analysis. Often, he suggests, binaries seem to intervene when they are least expected. They are already present in the background – so he is simply drawing attention to them.

The most important of Bhabha's binaries is his reduction of dissent to two options. Bhabha tends to construct the alternative as *either* a naïve, essentialist Marxism *or* his own position, complete with its negative ontology, frustration of meaning, quasi-theological pursuit of sublimation, and so on. Anything which is not precisely Bhabha's point of view is reduced in his reading to his chosen other, a variety of crude essentialism. Readings of texts which are ambiguous in terms of their relationship to Bhabha's position – which have some elements in common, but not others – are turned into either clones of his position or into forms of essentialism (see below, Chapters 13-14). Of course, using Bhabha's method, one could show that his own position *requires* this adversary. Just as others can pose as pure only by excluding impure others, so Bhabha can pose as impure only by taking others to be purists! More radically, he reduces to a binary an entire field of possibilities which are not reducible to the two options he provides. The net result is the same as in any binarised politics: those who are not with Homi Bhabha are against him. Anything that is not a lackist, quasi-theological anti-essentialism *must be* a binarised, totalitarian essentialism.

Postcolonial theorists believe that, since language is basically binarised, it is necessary to use binaries strategically, even when rejecting them on principle. This point is made more forcefully by Spivak than Bhabha, and is known as 'strategic essentialism'. Binaries are both necessary and impossible. We can't live with them or without them. Bhabha does not

do without binaries, but seeks to use them 'without transcendence', i.e. without resolving them (TT, 110; c.f. LC, 110). In other words, much of Bhabha's work is devoted to criticising something he also believes is ineliminable. Between the binarising of the rejection of binaries, the 'strategic' use of binaries, and the constant reference to binaries as objects of critique, Bhabha and most postcolonial theorists end up full of binaries. Often these binaries are at once deployed and disavowed. This makes it very difficult for them to articulate a coherent critique of binaries – and very difficult for others to understand and critique them on this point.



This re-binarising effect partly arises because Bhabha situates himself in an authoritative position, as teacher or therapist. There is a strong assumption of discursive authority in Lacanian-inspired theories. The theorist is like an initiate. S/he assumes s/he already knows the truth about structures of desire and discourse. The idea of standing in for the repressed 'other', so as to effect radical change, is drawn directly from Lacanian therapy. A properly trained analyst can see and exert pressure at the exact points necessary to disrupt the structure of a psychological complex. By standing in for the patient's other (the *objet a*, or object-cause of desire), the analyst can subvert their master-discourse – much as Bhabha wishes to do to colonial master-discourse. Bhabha thus tends to throw around diagnostic labels derived from Lacan. Foucault for instance does not simply disagree with Bhabha about the role of race in modernity, or overlook it - he 'disavows' it in 'complicity' with modern power (LC, 248). Bhabha does not have to *show* that Foucault's texts have the precise structure of disavowal; the simple absence of something Bhabha believes is true is

enough to render Foucault's position "disavowal". And Foucault is not simply wrong but *guilty*: complicit in dominant forms of power, presumably due to unconscious interests. He robs minorities of their liminal spaces (LC, 249). This recourse to clinical terminology makes critique very easy for Bhabha. He "knows" that his "trunk", his core beliefs, are true. He has labels for anyone who disagrees. And this is enough for him. Bhabha also seems to misuse clinical terms. Hence, he uses 'disavowal' to refer to any occasion where someone does not recognise something Bhabha sees as foundational to modernity. The strict Lacanian sense of disavowal involves simultaneous affirmation and denial of a traumatic fact, and can thus be shown exegetically. In Bhabha's sense, it does not have to be shown. It can be inferred whenever someone disagrees with his core claims.

In clinical settings, interpretive authority is constrained somewhat by the reality-check of the therapeutic process itself. The therapist has to engage empirically, 'ideographically' so to speak, with the idiosyncratic aspects of the patient's symptoms and worldview. Indeed, a Lacanian therapist would not typically claim to know what the patient's "object of desire" is. They just keep raising the question of desire until it appears. Lacan insisted that every instance of therapy is unique. "The same" symptom (say, eating shit) can have different meanings in different cases (as hysterical provocation, psychotic acting-out, perverse enjoyment and so on). A structure such as "disavowal" can be observed empirically: the patient both affirms and denies the same thing. In cultural studies, the same gesture can all too easily become despotic. The theorist is the therapist or educator; the reader, including any rival theorist, is there to listen, learn, receive, and be healed. Any opposition is a therapeutic symptom – a defence mechanism or therapeutic resistance. If someone else disagrees, they are assumed to be disavowing, denying and so on – the various defence mechanisms recognised in psychoanalysis. This leads to a non-dialogical relationship with the reader and with those whose work Bhabha analyses. The distribution of power between therapist and patient is not reversible. Hence, while it dislodges others' authority, Lacanian theory keeps a basically authoritative form of epistemological privilege in place.

There is something hierarchical in the construction of therapy – the analyst knows best, the analysand is the observed subject – which renders such discourse destructive of horizontality and dialogue in theoretical contexts. Often there is also interpretive violence involved, as in Bhabha's claim that Deleuze forecloses the issue of affect (see below, 853–9). The net effect of such thought-policing is to preclude difference, unless it shares the core shibboleths of one's own perspective. In other words, there is a performative contradiction between Bhabha's argumentative method and his advocacy of juxtaposing different positions without reaching 'final judgement'. The whole process is also marked by a performative contradiction. Poststructuralist theorists often call for humbling, but rarely practice it. The certainty that people do not exist as 'self-present subjects' and are simply bundles of observable social effects can itself come across as smug and arrogant.



Somewhere along the line, there has been a transition from psychoanalysis as a clinical theory to psychoanalysis as a set of discursive tools to silence opponents. The denial of psychological depth in certain strands of the Lacanian/Althusserian heritage contributes to this transition. There is a worrying mission-creep in the use of psychoanalytic language in Bhabha's work. He often accuses opponents of denial, foreclosure, and similar psychological errors. Most often, such claims are simply grounded on the fact that they

disagree with Bhabha's analysis or conclusions, or use a different style of writing. Claims of denial or foreclosure may be appropriate when made by a therapist to an analysand, when the analysand has a recognisable problem, has consented to such analysis to engage in the problem, and when there is detailed engagement by the therapist with the analysand's actual life and thinking patterns (though a Lacanian therapist would rarely state such things so directly to an analysand). They are not appropriate when made by an academic to scholarly opponents, when there is no therapeutic relationship and little personal contact, and where the topic of discussion is a substantive issue and not the opponent's psyche.

Hence, there is a binarising logic within Bhabha's thought. Nevertheless, binaries and discursive authority are favourite targets of critique. Marxism, and 60s/70s forms of feminism and anti-colonialism, represent easy straw-men here. Many of these movements posit a unitary category, such as the working-class or women, which they seek to liberate. Some of them do, indeed, tend to homogenise this category and to seek power on behalf of it (though they are more diverse and inclusive than the critique allows). But Bhabha, and many poststructuralists, link *all* adversarial movements into this critique, effectively foregoing anti-systemic politics entirely (except on a more-or-less reformist basis).

It is not at all clear that all such movements fall foul of the critique. When Richard Day (2005) writes of an 'affinity for affinity' instead of a counterhegemony, when John Holloway (2002) calls on us to 'change the world without taking power', or when Raul Zibechi (2010) celebrates the dispersal (rather than capture) of power, they are not simply positing an idealised subject which seizes power and realises liberation. Rather, they are opposing the dispersal of power (to act) to the centralisation of power (over others). Similar conclusions can be reached regarding the politics of desire (e.g. Deleuze/Guattari, Stirner, Hakim Bey, and Situationism). This approach involves a critique of representation and a form of political activism stemming from fluid, diverse, unique or holistic flows irreducible to categories. It is just as anti-essentialist as Bhabha, Derrida or Spivak. But it

does not view the plane of becoming not as a smooth space of cultural production *inclusive* of neoliberal capital and constitutively lacking. Rather, it sees becoming as an abundant force which is alienated and blocked in capitalism.



In principle, a theory like Bhabha's might lead to the creation of spaces where the boundaries between categories break down. Everything turns into everything else, and dialogue across different positions becomes possible. Bhabha talks about lateral or horizontal, 'side by side' solidarity without a sovereign authority integrating the translated positions (WR, 175). This would be similar to the Bakhtinian idea of carnivalesque, and the idea of transmodernity (see below, 544-9), as well as affinity-based politics. In practice, however, any such possibility is blocked by the unremitting negativity of Bhabha's affective politics, and by his covert deployment of strong binaries and shibboleths. The aestheticised style and the lack-infused general theory of Anglo-American postcolonial and poststructuralist theory provide a universal transcendental framework within which each difference must be articulated. This structure itself impedes the play of cultural difference.

Bhabha implicitly excludes his own theory from his critique of other generalising logics.

Apparently, he does this because he believes the general logic he theorises is in fact a feature of the differences it integrates. Once again, the claim of formal openness, a 'right to difference', actually amounts to a logic of sameness and closure. I believe that a rhizomatic politics is a more open approach. There is a general structure of sorts in autonomous theory also, but it takes the form of a rhizomatic connection of distinct groups and assemblages. This comes closer to rejecting the hierarchical logic of existing ways of integrating differences. It avoids installing a trunk because the formal model does not require that contact occur in any particular way, or indeed, that it occur at all.



There is a certain pessimism in Bhabha's work which speaks of his self-criticism of a past radicalism which was perhaps too binarised. The impression is unavoidable that Bhabha is an older, jaded radical denouncing younger activists for believing they can change the world. Older theorists like Bhabha have learnt the hard way about the grimdark nature of the world and the limits of human capabilities. They now pass on this 'wisdom' to their younger readers. Revolution doesn't work. The really radical gestures are small acts of transgression which avoid challenging the system head-on. Functionally, this process has a deradicalising effect on younger readers. It was thus largely functional for the dominant system in the 1980s-90s.

Increasingly, however, it has inspired new kinds of radical politics which are tied in complicated knots. Their practitioners reject the system radically, and value antagonistic forms of political practice. But they have internalised many of the claims of English-

language poststructuralists about the primacy of linguistic categories, the co-constitution of identities, the impossibility of forming any kind of 'outside', the automatic success of interpellations, the importance of voices from oppressed positionalities, and the rejection of all kinds of general explanations (except for those concealed within poststructuralist theories). Texts like Bhabha's have been re-radicalised, often by readers who have only half-understood their deliberately obscure prose. The result is that today's radicals have become extremely militant about aspects of everyday language and social action, and about representations in art, film, literature, journalism and politics. The force of revolutionary desire has been displaced from struggles around economic, political and macro-social structures, and from building concrete alternatives in everyday life, to a kind of puritanism about everyday conduct, language-use, and identity. The anger of the oppressed is displaced, more often than not, onto those who are closest to them politically. This is very different from earlier forms of anti-racism, anti-colonialism, feminism and other liberation movements. It is not what Bhabha intended, yet it is closely related to his own binarising practice.



Yet, binary oppositions *do* seem to be a forceful part of racist ideologies. People *do* oppress others by treating them as ciphers of abstract categories. What's more, this kind of binarising seems to be as characteristic of the radical left and anti-racism as it is of the far right. If Bhabha is wrong about subversion and antagonism, why is this the case? And why have sharp binaries re-emerged among the very people influenced by theories such as Bhabha's? I would suggest that the roots lie outside language. That language is a binary structure is itself only one among many theories. When people use exceptionally binary language, the roots of this linguistic "choice" or habit might well lie outside language.

Binarising may well be less a rhetorical or linguistic phenomenon than an effect of underlying affects (emotions) such as anger and fear. Binarising reflects what Bergson terms 'attention to life'. It entails a sharpening of perceptions in line with threat-perception and fight-flight responses. In other words, the more angry, afraid, panicky or geared to survival people are, the more they process things in binary ways. A more relaxed, 'extended' experience of the world as a continuum and as non-threateningly ambiguous is also possible. It may well be more in tune with the nature of the universe on certain levels. But it requires a certain orientation, and a certain degree of subjective safety. It is found, perhaps, in communities with a slow pace of life, in hippy culture, and some kinds of altered consciousness. But it is difficult for oppressed people to achieve, because they feel (and often *are*) constantly besieged by a hostile world. In this context, a perspective such as Bhabha's is dangerously elitist. It condemns the oppressed for binarising responses which reflect their social conditions, effectively individualising and moralising the emergence of binaries. If we want to reduce the social role of strong binaries, we need to create the conditions for people to not find each other so threatening.

In Bhabha's theory, however, this seems to be precluded by the constitutive nature of antagonism. While he opposes binaries and inversion, Bhabha's approach nonetheless abounds in militaristic analogies and adversarial rhetoric. There is always 'strategy', struggle, power-games. These power-games are zero-sum. Privileged people must lose not just their power, but their identity, so the oppressed can raise themselves up from abjection. The field of social life is thus conceived in a warlike way. Mimicry, for example, is a strategy of the will to power. There is a 'theatre of war' in which it is deployed (LC, 90). Bhabha opposes liberal views of the public space where people are neither for or against each other. Instead, he sees public space as formed through hegemony and resistance (LC, 190-1). Bhabha refers to subaltern people *seizing* the means of discursive production or the 'event' of modernity (LC, 183, 240, 246, 249), refers to the powers he uses as 'ballistic' (ODD, 8), analogises his approach to pulling a concealed gun (ONO, 13), talks about savagely rooting out the settler inside each European (CF, 64), and encourages

an exercise of 'calm violence' (LC, 196). Hence, he engages in a kind of revolutionary posturing, while also disavowing antagonism. Direct antagonism is avoided, but at the same time, everything is conflictual, antagonistic. The metaphors of negotiation and seizure coexist uneasily in Bhabha's texts. A violent separation is at once performed and disavowed.



This warlike vision of social life sits uneasily with Bhabha's rejection of antagonistic forms of discourse. As we shall see (below, 890-907), Marxist critics such as Parry see Bhabha's account as *insufficiently* antagonistic. Bhabha refuses the binarising, Manichean logics of anti-colonial movements, instead creating a space of negotiation. Yet he also deeply opposes liberal views of a consensual or deliberative public sphere. Bhabha does not avoid open antagonism because consensus exists or is possible. He avoids it because it is an ineffective form of warfare, given the structure of language as Bhabha sees it. How does Bhabha combine these two views: the claim that conflictual politics should be avoided, and the claim that society is inherently warlike? The two seem to be brought together in what is effectively a passive-aggressive discourse, which Bhabha both advocates and performs. Analogically, one might think of Bhabha's strategy as a kind of rhetorical guerrilla warfare. Open warfare is avoided, and instead, discourse is used as a weapon to disempower the adversary. One attacks the adversary, for instance, by knocking their ego down a peg or two, by cutting the ground out from under their meanings, by misreading and appropriating their texts, by creating affects of anxiety and panic. All of this is done while avoiding and disavowing open antagonism. The blame for the resultant conflicts will always be displaced onto the adversary.

Does Bhabha conceive *all* social life as conflictual, or only that between coloniser and colonised? This is unclear. But if binaries are basic to language, and all binaries create similar relations of power, it seems that all social life must have a warlike logic. People constantly interpellate each other through social perceptions and demands. This interpellation is always intrusive, threatening, even violent. There is a constant battle to interpellate and not be interpellated. At best there can be a balance of forces. Levinasian ethics might blunt the conflict a little, but it cannot eliminate it (see below, 683-694). Whether Bhabha can maintain such a warlike stance, while also keeping inversion off the table, is questionable.



What does it mean to see the whole of life as a strategic field of discursive power? I'm reminded here of Jason McQuinn's (n.d.) response to Jo Freeman's (1970) *Tyranny of Structurelessness*, an authoritarian feminist text opposed to horizontal movements because of the danger of informal hierarchy. McQuinn suggests that a palpable fear of the ambiguities of freedom, friendship and community underlies an almost paranoid fear of power-relations in informal settings in Freeman's work. The social world is imagined almost as a Hobbesian war of all against all. This has the predictable result that

authoritarian structures are preferred. I wonder if Bhabha's work tends towards similar outcomes. People come to find one another so threatening that their 'safe spaces' become increasingly bureaucratised and securitised, rather than autonomous and expressive. The loss of autonomy and spontaneity is, of course, a small cost if these are illusions anyway. This seems to be what Bhabha maintains. The suspicion arises, however, that the differential structure of language is serving as a stand-in for the usual Hobbesian or economic insistence that humans are by nature conflictual. Autonomy is denied, precisely because it is inconvenient for such an account.



The glorification of marginal, 'border' positions neglects the transformative possibilities of the antagonistic binaries more frequently seen in radical movements – for instance, historical anti-colonial movements. By reproducing dominant binary oppositions, such movements are dismissed as conserving the existing linguistic structure, even when they redistribute power and values within that structure. Bhabha's approach also downplays the importance of strategies of exodus, refusal, counter-community, secession, and living differently – which, by escaping the marginal, border site, slip outside what Bhabha sees as the transformative inbetween zone. For example, Graeber's discussion of peasants in Madagascar (2007b) suggests that they are able to live in non-capitalist ways to some degree, *because* they are largely unnoticed. For Bhabha, however, the act of dropping-out of the border zone between the system and its others – usually the site either of reformism or of adverse incorporation – is seen as a renunciation of radical possibility. It is implied that people will take the system's categories with them into their new world, via their language and identities. Yet this is by no means obviously the case.

There are historical times and places where a strategy of acting at the border zone is arguably effective in opening up possibilities on the inside, or restricting state power against the outside. For example, activists can use human rights laws and constitutional protections to ward off repression, or rely on 'dole autonomy' (Aufheben, 1998) for survival. But the fetishising of the semi-included 'border' zone as the necessary site of transformation encourages activists to adopt such border strategies in *any and all historical conditions* – even when the conditions of social inclusion are extremely adverse. And there is little doubt that conditions have become much more adverse since (say) the 1980s, when left-wing Labour councils, the welfare state, autonomous professions, radical academia, the legal system, and other residues of the Fordist system provided extensive avenues for semi-included radical politics (see Croaton, 2012; Ewig, 1989; Fisher, 1997; Madunagu, 2000; Mawdsley et al., 2005; Mohan, 2002; Wolch, 1999).

The literature on NGOs working with marginalised groups is particularly revealing here. NGOs are often dependent on funding from governments, companies, rich individuals, international agencies, or socially conformist mainstream subscribers. This, along with their bureaucratic structure, undermines the power and influence of the people who the group supposedly works for. Donor influence often undermines grassroots power. It also creates dependency on elites. Hybridity in such contexts leads to co-optation, not subversion (Ewig, 1999:80; Townsend et al., 2002:834; Esteves et al., 2009:2; Proshaska, 2006). In some cases, this even leads to NGOs taking on the role of a shadow wing of the state (Wolch, 1999; Fyfe, 2005). NGOs in this inbetween position are accused of promoting depoliticising, self-help discourses (Manji, 1998; Mohan, 2002; Desai and Imrie, 1998; Mawdsley et al., 2005; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001).

This role is sometimes connected to neoliberal forms of control (Williams et al., 2012; Hackworth, 2010; Fyfe, 2005). For example, Dolhinow (2005) studies NGO community

work in a Mexican migrant community in America. He found that, even though the studied group has a progressive transformative agenda, it was pushed by mainstream political, donor, and NGO demands towards neoliberal self-help approaches and creeping bureaucratisation. Bhabha's position is somewhat reminiscent of the neo-Tocquevillian associationalist view of NGOs which was fashionable when he wrote his major works (see Hann and Dunn, 1996; Foley and Edwards, 1996; Fisher, 1997). However, there is also some evidence that NGOs engage in quiet, Scottian resistance from within dominant coalitions (Fowler, 1993; Fisher, 1997:451). This said, resistance seems stronger among NGOs which refuse cooptation (Però, 2007).



Groups operating in the inbetween space are easily coopted by powerful elite discourses and become harmful to autonomous organising – including organising by oppressed groups such as migrants and African-Americans. This has given rise to a series of critiques of the harmful role of the “Non-Profit Industrial Complex” in American activism. It is suggested that NGOisation leads to deradicalisation, co-opt social movements, and operate as part of the state's counterinsurgency project (Incite!, 2004, n.d.; Croaton, 2012). Similar claims are made by Nigerian social movement activists: 'Until two decades ago, groups that today would be called NGOs were associated with revolutionary socialist movements... From the NGOs as refuge, the left re-emerges as atomised individuals united only by material and professional benefits, and the politically limited language of the NGOs' (Madunagu, 2000:404).

People who continue the strategies of semi-inclusion – working as radical academics, for example – find they are increasingly unable to avoid ever-deeper submersion in managerial control regimes. They are also increasingly unable to devote time, energy or resources to radical projects, and increasingly unable to achieve any meaningful reforms. Theories such as Bhabha's tend to glorify the activities of such semi-included subjects, giving them a false sense of their own effectiveness and encouraging their continued submersion in a situation of powerlessness. Meanwhile, the radically excluded, who are unable for structural reasons to access the border site (see Clover, 2016; Karatasli et al., 2015; Bonanno, 2011), are effectively denied agency completely, or else are theoretically misrepresented as if they were included subjects.



Bhabha's constructivism has political effects. It means that there are no general, objective realities for the theorist to discern. There can thus be no general theories of liberation (like Marxism or liberalism). The refusal of general theory means that the theorist has to take different, contingent positions in each situation. Bhabha's supporters argue that he does not reject political projects. Rather, he rejects styles of politics which refuse to think historically or contingently – re-applying the same categories to any situation. In practice, as we shall see, Bhabha also tends to re-apply similar categories over and over. In principle, however, he is in favour of a fluid, flexible, contingent kind of politics which resists power in whatever localised forms it happens to take.

The difficulty with this approach is that it requires that we be able to discern the difference between power and resistance, without any systematic way to do so. If there are no general principles, how does one know that one isn't simply being drawn into a new form of systemic control (as people like Dirlik and Hardt/Negri suggest of Bhabha)? How does one guard against the risk of taking positions which are simply fashionable, self-serving, or convenient? When in struggle with others, how does one establish whether they have sold out to the colonisers, or simply varied their tactics? There is a danger that everything turns into a struggle for personal power. If there are no principles, no general claims, then the operation of power is not frustrated. It is left unconstrained, able to use whichever tactics are most effective at a given juncture.

The lack of a clear demonstration that it is fighting power leads to views that postcolonial theory is complicit with neoliberalism. For Baudrillard, capitalism now operates in an aleatory way. It does not claim an essence, but instead, varies its contingent, cybernetic categories with whatever contingencies emerge. If Baudrillard is right about the structure of capitalism, then a perspective which can only see contingency is also trapped in the capitalist code. A good subject in contemporary capitalism is a subject who responds contingently to the aleatory cybernetic structure instead of holding to general principles. A rejection of capitalism must also reject the cybernetic reproduction of meaning and meaninglessness – the form of existing relations. Radical politics emerges from a broad, systematic rejection of the entire functioning of the system – not simply one or another of its local manifestations.

In common with other 'lackist' approaches (see Robinson, 2005), Bhabha's approach tends to politically disempower itself by seeking to retain whatever it critiques. It suspends the performative effectiveness of its critique by refusing the antagonism it implies, and instead using its recognition of horrors as a basis for sublimation. It can therefore maintain a stance of discursive critique, even discursive ultra-radicalism, while remaining completely

compatible with dominant practices. It thus has much in common with Roland Barthes' (1972:41-2) concept of 'Operation Margarine' – a type of discourse which inoculates against radical critique by admitting the truth in the radical's case, but denying its political consequences. Some of Bhabha's claims (for example, the view that modernity or whiteness requires an oppressed other to sustain itself) are extremely radical. But their implications are blunted because of the axioms of co-constitutivity, ego-dissolution and the rejection of political antagonism. For example, whiteness can't be abolished. Ideas such as democracy, justice and rights must be preserved. The state should not be rejected. Any performative force contained in Bhabha's political claims is sapped by his lackist ontology.



Bhabha seems to think that ambiguity or hybridity is the only possible or legitimate strategy of resistance to colonialism (and arguably, to any form of oppression). For Bhabha, to take an oppositional position is automatically to play into the system's game of creating fixed identities (Huddart, 2006:46). Yet this seems to deny the particular role of the system itself. The system usually places itself beyond the struggle between identities. There is a difference between fighting an opposing group, conceived as a definite identity, and fighting the system which creates the identities. For example, a type of feminism which pits all women against all men would fall into the trap Bhabha theorises. It is less clear that a feminism which fights patriarchy as a system, and the social construction of gender roles, conceived as something which oppresses both men and women, is problematised by Bhabha's critique. More to the point, naming capitalism or alienation in general opens possibilities to fight at a deeper structural level than the categories within the system. The differentiation it produces – the broadening of possibilities by putting the existing field in a particular category, and naming an 'other' – has opening effects. Its denial can have a flattening effect, rendering non-co-constituted 'otherness' invisible.

From Bhabha's point of view, one does not subvert the system by taking a radical stance against it. Rather, one subverts the system by blurring the barrier between system and opponent, ingroup and outgroup. If Bhabha is right, then one would expect to find in the historical record of social movements that the blunting of antagonisms and blurring of categories leads to more radical outcomes and more thoroughgoing social transformations. Yet historically, the blurring and blunting of social antagonisms is associated with processes of recuperation, which close off alternatives and reproduce systemic power. For example, radical class politics is blunted by corporatist inclusion, and ecological alternatives are blunted by greenwash and ecological modernisation initiatives (Gruenewald, 2004). Emerging points at which entire alternative ways of life are coming into being are foreclosed and cut-off due to recuperation – anarcho-syndicalism, council communism, deep ecology, eco-anarchism, the New Traveller movement, etc. In the colonial case, as discussed below (566-9), Bhabha's 'mimic men' often end up as a new ruling class in postcolonial societies, enforcing neo-colonial economics and western-modelled development in place of the colonial state. The evidence thus more closely fits a Deleuzian or Situationist model than a postcolonial model. Radicalism emerges as a 'line of flight', a process in which autonomous desires or subjectivities carry people away from existing attachments and into radical antagonism with the system. Processes of hybridisation are generally ways of recuperating these oppositional positions. Or sometimes, they are ways for autonomous actors to dissimulate, so as to survive in system-controlled spaces.

Bhabha's focus on internal subversion rather than antagonism involves an implied theory of the history of political change. For Bhabha, the antagonistic approach, which seeks to destroy one of the poles of a binary, is essentialist and authoritarian. Bhabha presumably has in mind here a number of cases where a radical, antagonistic movement has taken power, and turned (immediately or with some delay) into an authoritarian dictatorship. These might include 'communist' revolutions such as the Russian and Chinese

Revolutions, armed anti-colonial struggles such as those in Algeria and Angola, and liberal revolts such as the French Revolution. Bhabha's preferred approach is instead to keep the two terms in constant, insoluble contradiction, while using this contradiction to open up an inbetween space. But history shows that categories *do* get eliminated or replaced. Many binaries which were crucial in the Middle Ages – such as serf vs free man, aristocracy vs commoner, Norman vs Saxon, orthodox vs heretic – no longer exist, or no longer play a central role in social life. The divine right of kings, the refoundation of the Roman Empire and the transnational legal power of the papacy – all major themes of medieval politics – have disappeared from European political life. The concepts which Bhabha seeks to subvert and appropriate were themselves once antagonistic, revolutionary concepts (which is partly why they can so easily be 'subverted'). A concept such as democracy or rights would have seemed utopian and apocalyptic before it was partially actualised in post-revolutionary regimes. It is simply not historically true that the best we can hope for is to suspend, ironise, or displace the dominant binaries. It is also possible to replace them.



This observation leads to greater leeway for radically different social constructions than Bhabha allows. The main barrier to these transformations is the coercive power and social influence of the dominant regime – not the co-constitution of identity or the supposed structurally necessary gap between ideals and concrete regimes. For example, the state does not exist in every possible society (see Robinson and Tormey, 2010; Barclay, 1982; Clastres, 1994; Menkhous, 2007). The idea of societies without the state is not an

apocalyptic projection of an irreducible antagonism. It is not like the idea of a mind without a body. There have been, and can be, societies without the state (which may or may not have a *concept* of the state). There have been, and can be, societies without the categories of race, without nationalism, without capitalism. If Bhabha wishes to preserve these particular structures, he needs a stronger reason to do so than their reduction to the general structure of identity-formation. Strong constructivism and co-constitution create nearly insuperable barriers to radical change in a theory like Bhabha's. Since 'we' are supposedly *effects* of capitalism, the state, nationalism, race, and so on, 'we' will reproduce these systems (which are first of all discourses) in anything 'we' construct. Any attempt to refuse them will reproduce them through a self/other binary. If social construction is not cast-iron, however, then what can be constructed can also be reconstructed differently. One suspends or gets outside constructed systems simply by disengaging from them and creating other systems.

In short, Bhabha prevents people from ever disposing of current dominant categories. He prevents us from ever moving beyond the blockage of a contradiction which cannot be overcome. We can criticise whiteness, coloniality, capitalism, racism, the state, and so on, but we can never move beyond them. The performative implication of critique is constantly suspended in a state of ironic repetition. This accurately reflects the condition of most critical academics today – able to see some of the problems of the present, but unable to see a way out, and prohibited from engaging in truly radical critique. However, it is unhelpful for the excluded and oppressed. Bhabha's style seems suited to a reformist, quietist or gradualist politics. It is impossible to confront the imperative, transcendental language of the dominant system without at some point articulating a radical, imperative refusal. Bhabha gambles that deferral undermines the authority of the system's imperatives by restoring them to the constitutive inbetween space. However, this seems to ironise rather than eliminate the dominant 'trunk' or organising power or the system. It keeps in place what it critiques. Hence, Bhabha's strategy is only as convincing as the ontology which underpins it. If the system *really* relies on internal alterity and deferral in

the way Bhabha believes, then his strategies are plausible. If the system has the capacity to stop the sliding of signification at a certain point, then these strategies are insufficient.



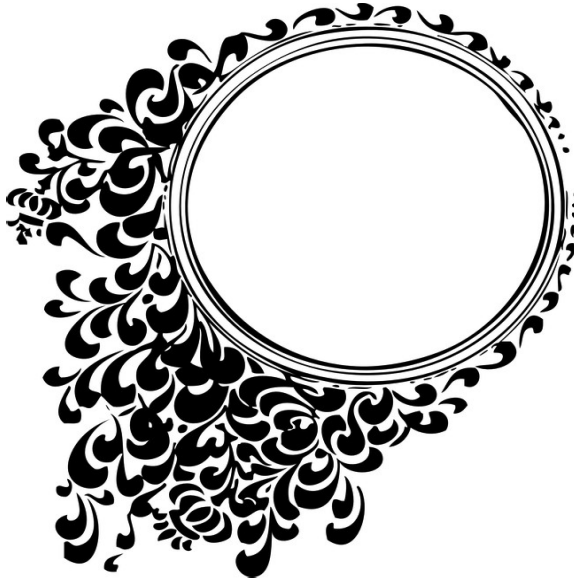
If the Lacanian/Derridean model is right, then any new structure will also be binarised, and will also require inbetweenness to keep its categories open. Whether we get no further than foregrounding ambiguity in existing categories, or pass on to a different set of categories, this basic structure of language cannot be changed. In practice, as we have seen, not all languages rely on this kind of binary construction, and experience may not be reducible to language in any case. In practice, there is evidence that forms of social integration which do not rely on internal binaries for their integration arise in autonomous social movements and other kinds of sect or 'bund' (Peterson, 2001; Robinson, 2018a), as well as in band societies (Ingold, 1999; Bird-David, 1994; Robinson and Tormey, 2010). Autonomous groups have antagonistic binary relations with authoritarian institutions, but their internal structure is largely liminal and horizontal. The antagonism is thus contingent. Today, a non-binary language or social relation is only possible behind a barrier protecting it from the dominant capitalist/statist system. It thus often seems that any such relation is necessarily binary. But this is an illusion. It arises because a contingent antagonism with a dominant adversary is mistaken for a constitutive antagonism within identity. It is quite possible for band societies to exist on the basis of the intensity of energies at their core – not the constitutive exclusions at their margins (Robinson, 2018a).

The Lacanian/Derridean position rests on several ontological gambles. Firstly, it gambles that suffering in the world is existential, and rooted in the basic structure of the world, rather than contingent oppressions which can be eliminated. Secondly, it gambles that the modern subject (as an inner psychological construct) – rather than the capitalist system or the disciplinary state or some other outer site of power – is the main source of social problems and resultant suffering. The 'Real' of a theory like Bhabha's, the possibility it cannot recognise and must resist at any cost, is the possibility that conflicts are simply contingent and soluble. Given the existential importance of incommensurable, unresolved differences, it seems that if they did not exist, Bhabha would have to invent them. This is perhaps why Bhabha, in common with many poststructuralists, is prone to read contingent conflicts as necessary and intractable. If these gambles are right, then the rest of a theory such as Bhabha's follows more-or-less logically. Antagonistic political struggle reproduces problematic categories, whereas hybridity and ambivalence subvert them. A political approach which does not break down people's egos ultimately helps the system to sustain itself.



But if the gambles are wrong, then the entire theory ends up locking-in existing structures. It changes how one relates to the system, but it does not change the system's functioning. Instead, it disempowers oppositional politics. People spend their time beating themselves down, and beating their closest allies down, instead of fighting the adversary. And people can even end up smugly complacent in their own sublimated discontent, while the business of oppression carries on as usual. Worse, suffering is glorified as necessary and inevitable, and sublimated into a mystical experience, when it could instead be alleviated or eliminated.

The gambler is wrong, of course, if realist epistemology is true. The simplistic binary between realism and co-constitutivity is popular with both realists and Derrideans. But the gambler is also wrong if constructivism is true, but the “language model” is false or incomplete. They are wrong if excluded 'others' are simply excluded, and not co-constitutive. They are wrong if a transcendental relation to the other, outside of desire, is unachievable. They are wrong if the level of 'molecular' desire is distinct from the linguistic level. There's a lot of different reasons they might be wrong.



What's more, having accepted their root beliefs so strongly, theorists such as Bhabha are largely unable to engage with the possibility that they might be wrong. Their choice to believe in constitutive ambivalence or co-constitutivity is *a priori*. It does not come from evidence and it is not falsifiable. So there is little that can be said to show them they're wrong. And the focus on the evils of essentialism and binary categories often deflect from a focus on the real suffering caused by capitalism. There is an implicit claim in Bhabha's response to antagonistic politics that suffering is really an effect of binaries, or at least, that rejecting a structure in an antagonistic way results in greater suffering than subverting it. This implies a conservative acceptance of *existing* suffering, which is similar in structure to the acceptance of capitalism because “revolution could lead to totalitarianism”.

Bhabha's emphasis on 'high' art and academic theory is a controversial position – though one which has become increasingly common. There is an obvious objection that it exaggerates the political or everyday social importance of 'high' art and academic theory. It is not that academic theory is apolitical. Even apparently neutral theories often have political effects. However, it is not clear that Bhabha's political effects are of the positive, activist nature he implies. Arguably, his style of theorising reproduces the privileging of academic settings over political and everyday discourse. It has a conservative effect of reproducing forms of top-down intellectual power. Alternatively, cultural and academic work might have no effect at all. It might only be read or viewed by a small number of people. And these people might not apply it in their practice. Bhabha thus gets academics' and artists' hopes up that they will have a bigger effect than they are likely to have. Also, he downplays differences between fields. The same speech-act has very different effects when done in academia or the world of high art, and when done (for example) as graffiti. In this sense, Bhabha's choice of sites and means of struggle is arguably unstrategic for radical change. Even if culture is transformative, it might be better to focus on everyday transgressions which are actually seen by large numbers of people. Or it might be better to focus on autonomous art-spaces which produce difference outside the dominant system.



For postcolonial theorists, there is a kind of conveyor-belt between academic theory and politics. Redefining concepts in academia creates pressure on policy institutions (PC 60). If academics succeed in replacing (for example) ideas of illegal immigration with ideas of legitimate rights to migrate, or underdevelopment with structural violence, this will rebound on governments and state institutions to alter policy. This position makes theoretical sense, since postcolonial theory tends to assume that modernity is somehow unfolded from the writings of philosophers such as Descartes and Kant. The imposition of modern reason is thus seen as a 'passive revolution' which starts with academics and is imposed by politicians.

However, it is not clear that political elites really care what someone like Bhabha writes. While there are cases where academic shifts are followed by policy shifts, Bhabha's analysis seems unduly optimistic. Often, governments simply ignore academic voices, or else use policy mechanisms to encourage pro-government shifts in academic discourse. For example, labelling theory and structural analysis of deviance became prevalent in the sociology of crime and deviance in the 1980s-90s, without producing any corresponding shift in government policy. Governments prefer types of theory which reinforce social control. And even if academics manage to change society through political influence, this is an authoritarian transmission belt. It's what Gramsci calls 'passive revolution'. The revolution is carried out by the elite, not by oppressed people themselves.



Bhabha's account of modernity is problematic for similar reasons. Indian scholar Karthick Manoharan, a follower of Fanon, criticises the view that the whole of western philosophy - and western philosophy alone - is tainted by white supremacy. The usual story (as found in Bhabha) is that western philosophy is tainted due to its reliance on binaries. This reliance renders racism fundamental, rather than accidental. Also, anthropocentrism (or the valuing of "Man") causes dehumanisation. Manoharan advances five arguments against this view. Firstly, non-western classical philosophers also made racist and supremacist comments. For example, Ibn Khaldun made racist comments about Africans. Secondly, dualism is just as strong in other traditions, such as Indian Madhavacharya. On the other hand, some western theorists (such as Hegel) are not dualists. Classical philosophers in most traditions also saw their own worldview as superior to others. Thirdly, radical thinkers and movements outside the west are often inspired by Enlightenment philosophy. Fourthly, the idea of western thought as the root of all evil maintains the central position of white people in history. White 'guilt' and 'self-flagellation' keep white people in power. It prevents a passage to transmodernity (see below, 544-9).



Fifthly, if philosophy caused Europeans to dehumanise other people, the same should be true for non-western groups which commit atrocities. Racist groups like the KKK rarely talk about Kant or Descartes. But armies of Muslim countries, such as Pakistan, often refer to Islam to justify atrocities. Hindu communalists lynch people in the name of Hinduism, even though Hinduism is non-anthropocentric. Attacks on Christians suspected of eating beef are supposedly motivated by non-anthropocentric values. Even Buddhism, which has a strong focus on compassion and nondualism, has been used to justify genocides. The only people who attribute such atrocities to "Islam" or "Eastern philosophy" are white racists. Yet the condemnation of western philosophy provides a model for this kind of racism. 'Such blanket condemnations are challenged for being philosophically unsound, historically inaccurate, or just plainly prejudiced, and rightly so. It is, however, a pity that Plato, who lived several centuries prior to the [classical] Islamic thinkers, can be easily faulted for not complying with twenty-first century standards of political correctness' (Manoharan, 2019). Manoharan thus concludes that individual racist remarks do not taint entire systems of thought. Enlightenment thought is more corrosive than supportive of imperialism. He calls for greater nuance in understandings of western and non-western philosophies.

While cultural activity is an aspect of most social movements, I feel Bhabha vastly overestimates its importance, and its transformative force in and of itself (separately from transgressive political practices and changes in everyday life). The artist or critic who poses as political, on the basis that cultural production is always already political, risks exaggerating her/his own political importance. This means withdrawing from those forms of struggle which actually impact on capital. It means continuing a liberal/reformist type of activity while passing it off as radical.

Bhabha's argument stems from the common poststructuralist observation that everything is discourse, or everything is political. The position that everything is political can be radical in contexts such as Situationism, *autonomia*, or 1970s feminism. However, Bhabha uses it to depoliticise politics by turning it into ideology-critique. The claim that everything is discursive may well be true, if one defines discourse widely enough. On a Foucauldian definition, 'discourse' includes practices, bodies, affect/emotion and so on, as well as language. But this does not mean that everything exists on a flat, equal discursive plane. Some discourses reproduce capitalism, others challenge it. Some discourses are central to the formation of social identities, others are marginal. The claim that everything is 'discourse' does not entail that all discourse is equally effective in challenging the system. Mainstream art is certainly 'political', but not in the contested, progressive way Bhabha maintains. Rather, it is typically hegemonic, or culturally imperialist.



Social constructivism does not necessarily lead to a conflation of 'high' culture with politics. Bhabha makes a particular decision to blur – indeed, to prohibit as immature – the distinction between a political intervention as such (which seeks change in the outer world, encourages action, and so on) and other works which change the world only in the indirect form of discursive production. This prohibition functions to conceal the necessity of political action. It encourages a naive faith that simply writing academic articles or producing works of art will directly change the world. The distinction between politics and academia or 'high' art – the refusal to reduce social change to a series of small interventions within dominant spheres – may well be 'immature' from Bhabha's point of view. Indeed, it is interesting how such silencing binaries (here, mature-immature) tend to

reappear when such authors are challenged. (c.f. above, 251-8, 264-8, 274-6 and below, Chapter 14). But if so, I don't want to 'grow up', to become part of a world in which systemic-level change is occluded, and only small cultural transgressions are possible.



I don't object in principle to the view that everyday life, or politics, is already a field of 'theory' (such as everyday philosophies and ideologies), or that theory is always political (even when it poses as neutral). However, I object to the way Bhabha elides the distinction so as to privilege inaccessible high theory and high culture. This is done in a way which undermines orientations to everyday life. Bhabha uses the idea that culture is always already politics to practice what is in effect high culture for its own sake. He uses the idea that culture is politics as an alibi, to insist that his practice is political, even when it has no apparent stakes outside of elite culture.



I would argue that the issue here is not that high culture is apolitical, but that there is an elitist practice embedded in the form (rather than the content) of Bhabha's position on culture. By stressing ambiguity and forbidding secession or exodus, he locks-in the dominant social system. By focusing on high art, he privileges elite spaces and neglects everyday practices. Bhabha suggests that political progress has occurred in the effects of artworks and novels seen by few. He ignores the everyday cultural practices which in fact define the political context, and arrives at a politically misguided analysis.



Selective Reading

Bhabha's tendentious readings of others' texts and artworks are also potentially problematic. Artworks are open to multiple readings, even beyond the creator's intent. However, the impression is unavoidable that Bhabha's readings stem from his own *idée fixe*, his recurring fixations and ideas. Bhabha projects his own concerns onto works, or conveniently finds them already there by reading the work sideways. Or else he selects works which happen to confirm what he already believes. Poststructuralist truisms (texts are open to multiple readings, readers rather than authors construct the text, meaning is always deferred) might prevent one from objecting to this on the grounds of its infidelity to the original text. But they leave open the objection that the selection of themes is too monolithic, single-minded, and resistant to the entry of anything which is not already part of the author's worldview.

Also, if Bhabha believes artworks are open to multiple interpretations, he should accept the same kind of use of his own work. Scholars referring to Bhabha's work often apply his concepts just as selectively and partially as Bhabha's own readings of artworks and rival theories. Yet, in this case, Bhabha *does* seem to believe that some readings are more valid than others. He complains when others misuse his own concepts - using hybridity, for instance, to designate a mixed state rather than an inbetween zone (SPD, 390-1). It seems, therefore, that his *idée fixe* is strangely exempt from the slippage of the signifier which applies to everything else. It functions as a concealed authoritarianism and master-signifier in Bhabha's work.



Bhabha discusses culture in a way which suggests it has radical power – but this power depends both on Bhabha's reading, and on the effectiveness of artworks outside their institutional spaces. He typically portrays certain artworks as *necessarily* producing a certain

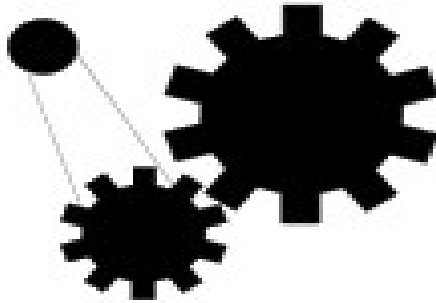
response (visible in their structure), which in turn produces transformative effects (shifting perceptions or producing a moment of sublimity). Yet as we have seen, Bhabha tends to focus on 'high' art with a limited audience. He also attaches tendentious, personal readings to the works he studies – readings which will not be immediately apparent to other readers. In practice, there are limits both to who sees or reads such works, and to how far others arrive at the same reading as Bhabha. Indeed, Bhabha never provides evidence that other viewers are affected in the ways he theorises, or that deeper political or social effects stem from whatever transformations these works initiate in their consumers. He assumes that, simply by performing a particular discursive gesture inside the artwork, artists and theorists have effected social change. Hence, Bhabha can write of '[t]he space of cultural signification that I have attempted to open up through the intervention of the performative' (LC, 148). Yet does Bhabha open a space, if nobody sees him do it?



One does not have to be an ontological realist to object to the assumption that readings have social effects. Even if everything is socially constructed, the process of social construction is only effective insofar as it influences how people view the world. Yet many of Bhabha's examples are not even seen or read by the majority of the world's population – or even the majority in the global North. Gramsci (1971:326) was acutely aware of the problem. Radical ideas disseminated only in limited, elite circles have no transformative

effect. It is only when a worldview is able to replace everyday 'common sense' as the lived everyday philosophy of large numbers of people that it has revolutionary effects in the outer world. The act of making theory accessible – without losing its core meaning, the challenge it poses to 'common sense' – is just as politically important as the creation of theory.

In avoiding the separation of socially constructed realities into different fields and layers, Bhabha avoids talking about the *specific* location of systemic power within everyday 'common sense' or 'ideology'. If certain patterns of belief and reaction persist, it is because they are entrenched in this location. Yet Bhabha seems to focus either on 'high' academic theory, or on 'experience', as if the latter emerges from positionality without the mediation of belief-systems. It is questionable whether there is a critique of common sense in Bhabha's work. On the one hand, he takes certain 'experiences' (usually of disjunction) at face-value, assuming they are already radical. On the other, his style attacks basic elements of everyday language-use, and his assumptions are counter-intuitive.



I would suggest that the answer to this conundrum is that the critique of common sense is simply not part of Bhabha's frame. Unlike Gramsci, he does not treat common sense as a philosophy or belief-system in its own right. Instead, he assumes that ideas central to elite-level philosophy (such as the 'modern subject') are also operative in everyday life. Their role in academic discourse directly generates their effects in everyday life, through power-knowledge complexes (possibly mediated by political elites). As a result of this position,

he assumes that changes at a theoretical level affect everyday beliefs. Further, he treats dominant beliefs as in some sense unavoidable. They can be suspended and ironised, but not overcome. Or, if they can be overcome, this is undesirable, because it leads back to antagonistic politics. This set of beliefs leads to a basically conservative approach to common sense, in which it can be supplemented with ironic distance, but not transformed into a different philosophy.



People outside an elite constituency are unlikely to view or read the works discussed by Bhabha at all. Rather, their perceptions of difference remain shaped by tabloid newspapers, action movies, crime dramas and the like. As long as this is the case, these artworks may as well be producing their sublime effects in a vacuum. And if they have an audience, the audience might remain immune to the radical effects Bhabha takes them to produce. As we have seen, readings are affected by prior assumptions. Many of the viewers/readers of the works Bhabha discusses are elite liberals who will in any case 'misread' the works, failing to see or experience the effects Bhabha proposes. Others will read these works in educational settings, in which institutional pressures (such as performance anxiety) undermine any radical effect they may otherwise have. At most, one can say that the works *could* have a transformative effect, *if* people see them *and* apply the right interpretive frame so as to be receptive to their effects.

As we have seen (above, 151), Bhabha believes that theoretical critiques of high-end artworks are directly political interventions in the field of power – equivalent to distributing leaflets on a picket line. He is thus able to imagine his own work as a cultural

studies professor to be a direct form of revolutionary political practice. A more realistic picture is that radicals associated with the emerging social movements of the 1960s/70s were allowed into university positions (at France's new Vincennes campus, in Women's Studies and Black Studies programs...) as a victory for these movements, but also as a way to tame and recuperate radicals. At the time, many of these people were vocal public intellectuals, participants in protests, even 'organic intellectuals' of movements such as feminism. Many continued to call for revolution, to defy the Establishment, to take part in radical movements while holding down university jobs. They were able to do this because of the considerable professional autonomy and authority of academics in the Fordist period.



As time has passed, the system's preparedness to tolerate and proactively include radical scholars has declined. This follows directly from the decline of social movements and the broader neoliberal 'reform' of social institutions. The climate has been made increasingly hostile to continuing radical thought and activity. There has not, however, been any move to destroy cultural studies as such. In fact, cultural studies scholars are often useful in training the next generation of educated precarian workers in the media and culture industries. But the field of university writing has been changed to fit into neoliberal capitalism. The radical potential of universities has been undermined by changes ranging from quantitative research assessment and performance ranking indicators, to the proliferation of insecure employment, the despotic power of neoliberal managers within universities, the depoliticisation of university spaces and the suppression of protests, to repressive interventions like the Prevent strategy in the UK, which aims to prevent 'extreme' ideas from spreading in universities. This context makes it increasingly difficult for radical academics to have any political effect through their work.

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Abbreviations Used for Homi Bhabha Texts

- [A] Adagio (2005)
- [AI] Affects and Interests (2010)
- [AMD] Anxiety in the Midst of Difference (1996)
- [ANNS] Anxious Nations, Nervous States (1994)
- [BSDP] The Black Savant and the Dark Princess (2004)
- [BWRAO] Black and White and Read all Over (1998)
- [CA] Conversational Art (1998)
- [CF] [Caliban Speaks to Prospero, in Mariani (ed.), *Critical Fictions* (1991)
- [CIB] Culture's In-Between (1993/2013)
- [D] DissemiNation (1990)
- [DD] The Other Question (2002)
- [DDR] Democracy De-Realized (2002)
- [DH] Diaspora and Home (with K. Stierstorfer, 2017)
- [DM1] Doublespeak and the Minority of One (2006)
- [DTDA] Dance This Diss Around (1995)
- [FBI] Freedom's Basis in the Indeterminate (1992)
- [GM] On Global Memory (2009)
- [HH] Halfway House (1997)
- [IIQ] The Identity in Question (with co-authors, 1992)
- [IoP] Identities on Parade (with B. Parekh, 1989)
- [ISBD] On the Irremovable Strangeness of Being Different (1998)
- [LC] The Location of Culture (1994)
- [LS] Laughing Stock (1996)
- [LSC] Liberalism's Sacred Cow (1999)
- [MD] Making Difference (2003)

[MGM] Minoritization as a Global Measure (with Sheng Anfeng, 2009).

[MM] Minority Maneuvers (1997)

[ODD] On Disciplines and Destinations (2018)

[OF] Opening the Floodgates (1987)

[ONO] Our Neighbours, Ourselves (2011)

[OQ] The Other Question (1982)

[PAS] Poetics of Anxiety and Security (2016)

[PC] Postcolonial Critic (with D. Bennett and T. Collits, 1991)

[PN3] Public Notice 3 (Kallat et al., 2011)

[QE] Queen's English (1997)

[RA] Rethinking Authority (1997)

[RB] The Manifesto/Reinventing Britain: A Forum (1999)

[RCA] Cultural Appropriation: A Roundtable (2017)

[RF] Remembering Fanon (1986, 1987)

[RH] Race and the Humanities (1992)

[SBS] Statement for the *Critical Inquiry* Board Symposium (2004)

[SPD] Staging the Politics of Difference (Olson and Worsham, 1998)

[SS] Spectral Sovereignty, Vernacular Cosmopolitans, and Cosmopolitan Memories (2017)

[TA] Terror and After (2002)

[TS] Third Space (1990)

[TI] Translator Translated (with W.J.T. Mitchell, 1995)

[UE] Untimely Ends (2004)

[UMLA] Unpacking My Library Again (1995)

[VT] Visualizing Theory (with V. Burgess, 1992)

[WH] The World and the Home (1992)

[WOTE] Introduction to Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004)

[WR] On Writing and Rights (1999)

[WS] The White Stuff (1998).

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